Today’s talk is on English poetry or Old English poetry of course the birth of English because this is pretty much where it starts and of course I’ll start with Beowulf for it is he and we will be talking about him a bit later on.

What I want to try and do is get across some general points about Old English poetry. Talk about poetry collections where they actually reside, go back to the first lecture I said about performance authorship audience, so we are going to have a look at those three aspects. Technicalities of Old English poetry and throughout we’ll be looking at some Old English poems.

However before we start a topical digression, kind of topical and this actually leads into the rest of the lecture but anyway let’s start with that. This is how the Anglo Saxons calculated or named their months if you have a look here’s our months January to December here’s what Bede called them in the early eighth century this is normalised the Saxons just shown you spelling differences and as you can see they bear very little to no resemblance to our modern month scheme. Apart from Yule which was their January which of course survived in Yule log and we are coming up to Yule. They’re actually really, really good month names far better than this nonsense here for example Eostermonað is obviously where Easter time, Ðrimilcemonað, which is when you can milk your animals quite a lot so you get a lot of milk and as we are heading into it Winterfilleð so you are filling up your baskets and your stores for winter and Blodmonath, blood month when you start slaughtering the animals for Christmas to try and get you through the winter. Now that’s how we should name months but unfortunately we went the Gregorian equivalent.

However we did keep hold of their days as I mentioned which doesn’t really matter too much on a calendar. So this is the names of the days, named after the sun the moon and these of course tend to indicate really old pagan relics. Tuesday is named after the Tiu, Woden, Thor etc. so those names do survive in our days of the week and I think I mentioned that right at the beginning. If you want to find out how they thought about time and days go and read Bede.

Now why am I talking about this? So we are going down two different strands and it is all going to come together okay. A bit about the days is interesting because normally we say a day starts at just gone midnight and that’s the day so what are we Wednesday? Thursday today so Friday will start just gone midnight but the Anglo Saxon’s didn’t calculate days like that or think of days like that. They thought the day started, the next day when the sun goes down. So whatever it is, half past five whatever today, that would be Friday, the start of Friday so it was important to them, the evening before the day.
Old English Poetry

Christianity you might not think this is related but it is related arrives in Britain or England again in 597 it was there before but that’s St Augustine mission. Let’s keep with the Christianity first what did they do, how did they go about trying to convert people to Christianity? They just didn’t go through and say you’re wrong. Everything you’ve thought about is complete nonsense what they did was something called appropriation, they would take the beliefs of the Anglo Saxons and they did this throughout the world actually and try and appropriate it and change it. So Easter you may wonder where the Easter, Easter is actually a pagan deity we think and they just took that name and turned it into Easter so that’s why we have that name.

Okay so that’s that little strand and here was aefen or evening is part of the next day.

A good appropriation that the Christians did was they looked around and they found these various feasts, one was Samhain the Celtic feast all around the same time the Norse feast the vernaccia which they appropriated and they called this the feast of All Hallows.

Evening before something still resides as it was important to them all the time but we still have a couple, mid-summer’s eve that’s why we talk about that because that’s important Christmas eve, Christmas obviously 25th December. The chances of that actually being the birthday of Christ are fairly remote but again it is an appropriation of a pagan belief and feast. So evenings again hang on and you can see were this is heading.

The actual summer, end of the summer which was what they appropriately named the feast of All Hallows this is what they believed, this is what the Germanic people believed like the Celtiana, the people who used to celebrate this night by lighting large bonfires to frighten spirits and demons because on this night they freely roamed the world and it was also on this night that Odin or Woden the Anglo Saxons were suppose to lead the spectral horseman and hounds in the wild hunt. The wild hunt goes all the way to May eve which is Purgas Nacht.

So if you take that all together you can probably guess what we are talking about the 31st October All Hallows eve, All Hallows day as [?? 0:04:59] Halloween okay so that’s were we get that. So why I’m bringing this together is it is showing you that in Old English or the Anglo Saxon period you get a fusion in this case between Christianity and Pagan beliefs and you get appropriations so they pick up things. This is a theme which we get in the poetry that’s why I’m trying to say that.

They obviously did believe there was something slightly odd about this, about Halloween what this basically says is that we heard say certain man that if any, that no man will live if he lets blood on All Hallows mass day on the 1st November or if he is wounded. So if you get wounded or you draw blood on the 1st November you’ll die.

Tables of lucky and unlucky day is a text in Old English but of course it was written down by Christian monks so they obviously still had these beliefs floating about which we wouldn’t believe now. What does this tell you? You can learn a lot about today for yesterday or Saturday from yesterday. Anglo Saxon England is a fusion different languages, different beliefs, Christian, Pagan and Christian missionaries appropriated material. So put that to the back of your mind because it will all come towards the end of this lecture.

Right Old English poetry, so shout out time what Old English poems do you know, have you heard of?

Thank God, yes [Beowulf] yes. The Wanderer, good Dream of the Rood’s, Caedmon’s song or Caedmon’s hymn which is on your handout, Gawain and the Green Knight is middle English so it is a bit later. Seafarer, good, Battle of Maldon I heard. What was it, The Ruin someone remembers my lectures okay good, that’s good you’ve heard of quite a few.

Here is a few more for you, this isn’t everything I’ve forgot I remember I was looking at this the other day and I’d forgotten about the Maldon, unless I’ve put it in twice but anyway this is a list of some of the Old English poems that you may or may not encounter.
Beowulf starting, I mean Beowulf probably accounts for in terms of line numbers all the rest of them, but you can look through the names of perhaps you can see some things leaping out. There’s the imaginatively named Christ One followed by Christ Two and the sequel Christ Three. Guthlac A, St Guthlac and then there is a Guthlac B, it is just hanging over there and things like that.

If you looked, even look at the titles you’ll see that a lot of them are referring to the Christian story, the old and the new testaments so we have Genesis, Exodus, Daniel the old testament then anything about Christ is new testament. There are things about battles the battle of Brunanburh, the fight of Finsburgh the battle of Maldon. There were heroic poems such as Beowulf which mixes everything and there are the eulogies the Ruin and so on and so on, and then there where poems which were do you put them? Like the Seafarer, like the Wanderer which tends to deal with more physiological themes they are psychoanalytic poetry if you like.

Old English poetry. It survives pretty much in four manuscripts four books, if they hadn’t survived you wouldn’t be here you might be cursing the fact that they survived but anyway they did. Four manuscripts and they are all written in around a 50 year period that’s when they write the text down, 975 to 1025.

What you also often find because there are only four is that there is one copy of a poem, so that’s got all kinds of things we’ve got to think about there but anyway one copy of the poem and if it is damaged tough, you’ve just got to try and work round it as we saw earlier on.

So the manuscripts as they are called are the Beowulf manuscript which is actually given this is its proper title, British Library Cotton-Vitellius A XV. Does anybody know why things are called Cotton and Vitellius?

Okay, it was a collector called Sir Robert Cotton who collected manuscripts in the 17th Century, that’s him and he had them all in his little library and each bookcase on each book case it had a bust of a person from the classical period so in this case Vitellius but you get Otho, Cleopatra etc and then there’ll be shelf A, B, C,D, E then it will be book along so we know this was on shelf a it was the 15th book along on the little cabinet that had a bust of Vitellius on it. Unfortunately well maybe because he called his house Ashburnum house it burnt down and we lost a lot of manuscripts in 1731 I think it was.

It is also called the book of monsters but we won’t go into that. The second one is about half a mile that way whatever it is in Bodleian library we call it the Junius manuscript. The third one ends up in Italy, it is in Vercelli we call it the Vercelli book not surprisingly and it is a manuscript full of poems and other things as well but it is sitting there which is probably a pilgrimage route to Rome so someone had this along with them either gave it when they got to Vercelli or forgot it, probably unlikely, but anyway it’s ended up there. And the forth one which has loads and loads of poems it sitting in Exeter cathedral.

There are fragments etc going around the place a few bits and bobs here, later transcripts but that’s it pretty much all the poems you will come across are from those four manuscripts. Here is probably the most famous poem or one of the most famous poems in English literature that is Beowulf, that is the start of Beowulf and you can tell pretty much immediately this is not a gloriously illuminated manuscript, they probably didn’t thing too much of this they just wrote it down. I mean they didn’t even get round to colorings in the H as you can see.

What you are seeing round the edge here by the way is sellotape or the Victorian equivalent of it because what happened was this was one of the manuscripts that got burnt in that fire, chucked it out of the window, “Oh this place is burning down” they get it back they have these things and what they do is all these loose pages they put them between two cards and they sellotape them down.

Not exactly a way you would want to handle the Beowulf manuscript but anyway. So that’s a manuscript but also in Old English this is a manuscript, it may not look like a manuscript but it is this is the Rothwell Cross and around the edges I think I showed you this in the first lecture are
runic inscriptions which are some lines from a poem called the Dream of the Rood which someone shouted out. So even when we talk about manuscripts it is confusing in the Old English period because there are so many other things we have to look at.

Okay some key points about Old English poems. First of all, all those titles you saw we’ve made them up. The Anglo Saxon’s did not title their poetry and this can be slightly confusing because you might read older additions from many, many years ago and you think “Oh wow I’ve never heard of that poem” and it is actually the same you’ve been reading but somebody just gave it a different title.

Undated, we have no idea when these things were written. With the exception of something like the Battle of Maldon it can’t have been written before the battle quite obviously and the battle was in 991 so we know it was written around then or after or much later. What we do know, they were written down on those manuscripts around that period but when they were composed, when they were put together is a matter for a lot of discussion and also they are anonymous, we don’t know anything about the poets. With two exceptions we know the names of two Old English poets.

Who? No, Alfrich is a prose writer but it is a good point because he plays around with poetry but he is a prose writer.

Caedmon, good, yes he’s on the front of your handout actually or he should be there, his poem. Caedmon okay. Does anyone know the other one?

Well Bede writes in Latin but he does actually record Caedmon hymn down.

Yes someone said it [Cynnewulf]. Good, okay so we know the name of two poets, we know very, very little about them we know a bit about Caedmon. This is it, this is Caedmon’s complete works and the story is he’s in Whitby, Bede writes this story down so obviously it is pre 730’s when Bede’s writing his book so some time in the 7th century. He’s this little sort of nondescript character in the abbey, they all start having a party, they all start singing songs or reciting poetry, he says “Oh I’m out of here I don’t know how to do that.” Runs away to a little shed, falls asleep, get woken up by an angel, the angel says “Sing me a song” and he says “I can’t sing” and he says “Oh yes you can” and Caedmon sings Caedmon’s hymn and Bede records it down. And that basically is the first poem in English that we have. Great isn’t it.

Anyway he did write other stuff but we’ve all lost it, so we know a bit about Caedmon but there we are that is his poem Caedmon’s hymn and it is on the front of your handout and you will see if you look at the Old English it kind of breaks down into the rules we expect of Anglo Saxon poetry.

[Cynnewulf] we have four poems from Cynnewulf, we don’t anything about Cynnewulf apart from his name and what happens is in these four poems you will see the Old English here every now and then some runes appear usually towards the end and it is usually in a text or something about saying “Remember me” or ”Think of me” and in those four poems when you put the runes together they spell Cynnewulf. Which is like him saying “Please remember me” but we don’t know who he is, we just know his name. He has a certain style and those are the runes C.U.I.E. that’s how they follow.

Some people think even Cynnewulf doesn’t exist because if you put it together it is possibly to do with the life of a sheep or the relationship life of a sheep, so it is joke about manuscripts, because that’s where manuscripts come from. But anyway I like to think of someone called Cynnewulf who thought “Well one day if I, people might read this and think of me.” I think of him anyway.

So back to these poems, okay all kinds of things there and what I want to do here because you may have read a lot of these or you may have read some of these poems and even looking at the title you think “God they’re dull” and they are not, they’re not they are very interesting because they do all kinds of fascinating things but I’m going to pick on the riddles which we had a look at yesterday in the grammar class and I’m going to talk about, we are going to have a look at three riddles.
So riddles are as they say they are short poems a bit like that moth riddle and it is a puzzle. They would have read these out and you would have had to guess them. So you can imagine you are at a party, a feast, whatever everyone’s drunk, everyone’s get blah, blah, and then saying “I’m not hearing Beowulf again I know the ending anyway it is 3000 lines long. I’ve got a good one I’ve got a really good riddle” and you tell the riddle and then everyone has to guess it. It is a game, it is entertainment it is what they probably they used to do.

So a riddle, what’s the answer? Anyone?

Anchor, well done. Yes it is an anchor. It is an anchor speaking and this is kind of common for a riddle it is the object talking to you. I the anchor and it describes itself in very vague terms and then you know my stature now guess my name. You can imagine just saying that in they’re all going “Is it a big fish” or something like that, “No it is an anchor.”

Let’s see this one, I like this one, I don’t like the translation but I like it. It is a good one, anyone?

Well the clue is, no.

The clue is that another woman is fitting me out under a soft garment as her own children, but then yes, it is a cuckoo she had less of her own sons and daughters because of what she did. Which is a kind of really nice way of describing a cuckoo it is not just saying “Oh I’m a bird and I lay my egg in someone else’s nest what am I?” If you do it in a kind of cryptic way...

Okay now these are contained in the Exeter book there isn’t a bit at the bottom of the manuscript you turn it up and you get the answer okay. So we are kind of putting on our answers to these and guessing them and some of them we have no idea what they are, these run into the dozens nearly a 100 of them.

Okay one more.

Absolutely. Onion, I don’t know what they were thinking about, yes of course it is an onion. It is obvious isn’t it standing erect in bed you start crying etc, etc, hairy underneath what else could it be? Well of course we know what else it could be and that’s why you where kind of laughing because and there a few of these, there are a few of these sexual innuendo riddles which play on certain things and you can imagine how this would have gone down.

Now of course the interesting thing is this was written down by a monk in some people say the monks where interested in the riddles because it explained the complexities of gods creation etc, etc. I think that is rubbish I just thought these were dirty jokes and they used to tell each other and just for a bit of a laugh to liven up monastic life. Seaside postcards, Carry On films, even the so called alternative comedians which appeared in the 80’s all fall back to these standard, smutty jokes and why I like this is because you will be reading the Wanderer, you will be reading the Seafarer, you’ll read the Dream of the Rood and you think these were extremely serious people, but maybe those are the poems that people just decided to write down and it’s just by chance we get these things.

These give us a kind of glimpse of what they found funny what amused them and there’s something, if you take a step back, something magical is the wrong word but realizing that people a 1000 years ago found things funny that, well maybe you don’t but a lot of people in modern day Britain do.

Okay analyzing poetry. So standard thing, literal, thematic, stylistic okay, don’t try applying this to the onion riddle you won’t get very far there isn’t much thematic analysis going on there, but as I said yesterday if we took the Moth riddle literally what is it about? It is a bookworm, an insect but also a person who reads books.

Thematic, what is the main message of the poem and you tend to look as we talk about a bit later, allegorical, moral and spiritual but reading is pointless unless you understand information. And stylistic and I told you there he broadens out from a moth, to he, so the subject becomes wider and then he focuses more on from words to the strong foundation which I would argue is the teachings
of Christ okay? So that’s how you would analysis a poem but as I said the onion riddle or the riddle about the key, I’ll leave you to imagine what that can be about, don’t do it.

So on to those three things performance poetry was entertainment, I’ve already touched on that in terms of the riddle but it was entertainment and the first question people often say was, was it sung. Because you hear words about singing, singing songs and Caedmon talks about I can’t sing anything. Well here’s a manuscript image from the Anglo Saxon period where we have a person here I think it is King David but he has a sort of harp which looks very much like the harp we found in Sutton Hoo and you can see these guys playing the trumpet and what have you and he’s just getting down and having a bit of a dance etc.

So they obviously had a musical world but whether they applied that to their poetry who knows. Well this is a clip from the 70’s as you will tell by the clothing but this person obviously took it a bit far. I don’t think so. Try doing that for 3300 lines, actually you’d be, they’d hit you with an axe before you got to the fiftieth line but anyway there we are. So there is this conjecture about music and someone was talking yesterday about the performances at British Library were they is some musical accompaniment, but generally one would imagine it would be the odd strum here and there to give it a bit of intonation. But it was entertainment and Sidney’s quote here “The Defense of Poetry” pretty much sums up what my view of Old English poetry “He the shot” that’s what we call a poet in Old English poetry Sidney does the same “cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion either accompanied with or prepared for the well and enchanting skill of music and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you with tale which holdeth children from play and old men form the chimney corner” and that’s what the poetry was there for. It was there to entertain; it was there to capture the imagination.

Now it is very easy to get yourself in a mind set of translating and look at Mitchell and Robinson and just working your way through the poems drudgely, you’ve got to try and get away from that and think about how these poems would have gone down with the audience in the style that we think they were performed. As he said there they were generally performed we think in some sort of feast, they would have come up after dinner entertainment, the poet the shot, the creator would have walked in and told the tale and everyone would have listened and cheered and what have you.

So let’s try a bit of an experiment. Right so now you have got to do a bit of an imaginative leap. I can’t see so I’ve got a bike light, okay so a bit of difficulty I know we are in a 1960-70’s lecture theatre but I want you to imagine you are not. It’s very difficult I want you to imagine you are in a mead hall okay, dark, it is nighttime you are in a mead hall you’ve just all had a feast and in comes the poet and he starts to tell you a song or tell you a tale.

Outside it is raining, outside it is thundering whatever. You know that in an hour or so or if you want to go to the loo you are going to have to go out there into the darkness and out there there’s nasty things. And he comes along and he tells you the story of Beowulf. Now I’m going to pick it up at the point where the people in the poem are in a hall and this monster called Grendel who’s been going in and killing them all comes in and bursts in. I want to try, try and you can shut your eyes whatever, listen to the Old English listen to the modern English and try and picture yourself what this must have been like.

“[[?? 0:23:47]]” “Then out of the night came the shadow stalker stealthy and swift, the hall guards were slack asleep at their posts, all except one. One man was in fighting mood.” “[[?? 0:24:02]]” “In off the moors, down through the mist bands, God cursed Grendel came greedily loping. The bane of the race of the men roamed forth hunting for a prey in the high hall” “[[?? 0:24:18]]” “Under the cloud mark he moved towards it until it shone about him a sheer keep of fortified gold” “[[?? 0:24:32]]” “The iron braced door turned on it’s hinge with his hands touched it” “[[?? 0:24:43]]” “Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open the mouth of the building, maddening for blood, pacing the length of the patterned floor with his loathsome tread” “[[?? 0:25:01]]” “With a baleful light flamed more than light flared
from his eyes” “[[? 0:25:09]]” “And his glee was demonic, picturing the mayhem before morning he would rip life from limb and devour them.”

Okay so that’s what you’ve got to try and picture with the poetry. Move away from this idea that it is just if I can turn this damned light off, if it is just in the book printed, think the performance. Try and imagine yourself going out into the toilet after that it wouldn’t be too easy.

Okay so perform for an audience, make it memorable that’s probably why alliteration is in there, rhymes in there, because everyone writes like [[? 0:25:55]] it’s like brave new world, write it down. Alliteration, rhyme, do it in a way they would listen to. You will hear that alliteration coming at you all the time, internal rhyme “Wow this is great” you’re hooked and if you want the bums on seats the as you like it concept. Give them what they want, what do the punters want? Well they want stories, tales themes that they understand that relate to them. They want what we call tight scenes, they want familiar things coming in and I’ll talk about that in a second. And technically they were probably astute to know what was good or bad poetry.

So what did they want? Let’s think about those ideas, heroes, now you are fine with heroes and bravery and battles there’s lots of them. They wanted loyalty and feuds; you see these coming up in their poetry again and again. They also wanted deeper poetry, meditations on life, faith, the harsher aspects of life and particularly what it was like to live outside of society if you where exiled. What did that mean to you as in the poem “The Wanderer” it probably meant certain death and common type scenes. What I mean here are these little, little scenes that as they appear in the poetry it triggers something in your mind. I’ll talk about this a bit more in lecture five but a good example is the “Beast of Battle” if you are reading a poem and suddenly a raven or a wolf starts appearing you know there is going to be a battle because these are the beasts that will feed on the corpses of the dead and they used to trigger those out and then you go “Ah right.” Battle time and things like that and there are other type scenes which we see in there.

Okay heroes you are fine with heroes if you’ve had someone like Beowulf he’s a classic hero. He is a young man comes in, kills people, kills monsters, goes of and kills dragons. You’ve got a bit of a problem with Christ though, because Christ isn’t a hero for the Germanic people. Basically if you think of the story he’s dragged to the cross, he’s crucified and he dies. This is not Thor, this is not Odin and that’s why when you read Old English poetry they turn Christ into this military hero.

He marches up to the cross and they particularly like the scenes where he goes down into hell, harrows hell on the day before the resurrection and kicks arse with the demons. So they turn him into a military hero which is fascinating stuff.

Now think of those other themes exile etc, is exile something, loneliness is that something whatever or feuds. Well let’s start with feuds, classic film, it is just a feud, it is a feud story one family fighting another the lone hero in the middle. But more recently The Wire if you think about that the whole first series and the second series to a certain degree is about a feud. It is about a feud between two rival gun, drug dealing, gun gangs.

What I particularly like about The Wire, particularly that early series is that it really does build on almost like Anglo Saxon and early tribal cultures because you have the young warriors trying to impress the older warriors, which is exactly what was happening there.

Loneliness, exile, well as I said exile pretty much meant a death sentence because there was no-one to protect you, you would wander around that’s why “The Wanderer” is a particularly powerful poem, there was law to protect them, no one to feed and no one because the legal system was basically pretty ropey at that time. But you can be lonely whilst you are in society and some of the ideas which you get in the poetry is as typical to De Niro’s taxi driver or the Beatle’s Eleanor Rigby.

So what I’m just trying to say in a very labored way is that the themes may seem distant but they are not. You can start applying them and I would actually argue that some of the things we find in
Old English poetry are a damned sight more relevant to our life now a days than you find in other things. Certainly other periods of literature and I won’t mention her name.

Okay Old English poetry because it has to get edited out. The technicalities. The technicalities of Old English poetry, so the mechanics each half line okay. So we have a line in poetry, you can have a look at Caedmon’s Hymn and it is in two half lines okay and we call these A and B or on verse, off verse and then running down that you have a white blank or usually printed off but this is [?? 0:29:49] and they would have heard these things.

Half line, minimum four syllables, two stresses and they usually fall on meaningful elements in the half line. Don’t worry about writing this down. The slides will all be on web learn book.

They are linked by alliteration which you already know and the stresses alliterator you had two stresses one or two in this first half line alliterating with the second one. So I’ll give you an example of that, by the way that’s how Stephen Fry describes Anglo Saxon poetry. “Reality is a [[sysergy 0:30:23]] of dipodic [[?? 0:30:24]]” he’s kind of right I wouldn’t agree with the dipodic as I’m sure you all agree.

So a line on 525 from Beowulf “grimre guðe, gif þu Grendles dearst” Standard, so we can see the alliteration grimre guðe Grendles okay so there’s our two stresses in the first half line the A line, one in the second. We have four syllables and then if you say the line grimre guðe what we are marking here is stress, unstress, stress, unstress and if you have a look on your handout but don’t worry if you haven’t got it I think I’ve got it coming up. No I haven’t or maybe I have somewhere.

You will see a table of a series of slashes and Xs and slashes and Xs, and that is what we call Severs five type. It is coming later but I’ll but bear in mind that thing like that stress, unstress, stress, unstress.

Okay just to tell you it is relevant of course, Auden used to write quite a bit of his poetry imitating the meter and style of Old English poetry, why because he was a student here and taught by Tolkien. So that table there this is the what you were looking at possibly in your hand out.

Now why is this interesting and what the hell does this mean it looks gibberish but it isn’t. Basically a chappy called [[Severs 0:31:41]] in 1885 went through all of Old English poetry, good luck to the man and he worked out that the half lines fall into five basic patterns like these but we call them D is a couple there so A, B, C, D, E, so you might see a line described as Edwards or Severs type A, Severs type B. Basically it is stress, unstress, stress, unstress, stress, stress, stress, stress, stress. And you can go through Old English poetry and these half lines tend to fall into these patterns and it is extraordinary.

If you want you can think of them like that, you are not quite right but if you’ve been grilled in things like [[trocis 0:32:31]] and iam’s and things like that you might want to add them there but put a question mark there because it is not exactly true.

So here is a section of Beowulf and you can see the type of thing that some people do, they go through each half line and they try and work out is it a Severs D,E,A,E and so on. Lecture five on films on movies we will come back to that okay.

Poetic style so you have alliteration we all know what that is but you can also have double alliteration, oh yes, or ornamental alliteration so the alliteration might be there, and there, and it is on the same and it carries over several lines. So that is quite a way of a very powerful way of doing things, Parallelisms, if I can say it in variation, we saw that yesterday repeating a theme, repeating an idea, repeating a description reinforces that.

Remember this is all being delivered orally to an audience you’ve got to keep them with you.

Complex microstructures, that sounds good doesn’t it, ring compositions okay. So what that means is suppose you had five lines. That line would mirror that line, that line would mirror that line and that’s what we call the kernel and it works on quite a low level in terms of a few lines but it also works on a grand level.
So Beowulf begins with a funeral and in the middle there’s a major speech. So they could even think on such scale as that.

They had things like Kennings so there is certain vocabulary which only occurs in poetry. Kennings is very familiar if you’ve done German but basically it is were you take two words which mean two different things, stick them together and it means something. So you might have the word barn, haus which is bone house put them together you’ve got a skeleton or whale way, way is road whale whale, road, the sea and they used to do that just to try and make it more and more memorable.

They also used formulas. I can’t go much into this but just basically what, well there was an analysis of Old English poetry and it came out with all kinds of theories but basically they found that certain half lines pretty much appear again and again again in Old English poetry, throughout all those texts and there are quite a few of them. What they came up with is it comes from a theory called oral formulaic and basically they said that if you are a poet and you are in an oral culture where you deliver everything, you are not writing down you are not literate, the way you perform, the way you went into a mead hall, you would have this store of half lines in your head and you could pluck them out anytime you want and that’s why we see these formula’s again and again in this poetry. Therefore what their argument was, was that all poetry, regardless of when it was written down comes from an oral culture because we see these formula’s again and again and again. Which doesn’t quite work but anyway that’s oral formulaic theory.

However it is quite an interesting idea and complicated syntax I don’t need to tell you any more about that because you saw it yesterday.

So Old English poetry two half lines, each half lines has two stresses or beats, lines are linked by alliteration but we also see internal rhyme. They have repeated phases which they re-used, it was performed orally to an audience off the cuff, from memory usually pulling out half lines again and again. So if you’re at 2005 line in Beowulf you’ve done your A line you’re thinking what the hell am I going to do a B line. I’ll just throw in a B line that alliterates and keep yourself going.

Does this remind you of anything? Well it has reminded a few people of something, you can judge whether it reminds you of this.

It is not a bad film I don’t think, but anyway the point is it is the only film clip I know of that type of setting and people have put an analogy with the way the oral performance of Old English poetry to rap and things like that, you would get thrown off the stage if you slip up so the way to keep it going is to have things in your head and consequently bring them out. You can see he was linking it by rhyme, that’s how we followed it through and you’ve got your stresses and beats. Alliteration not so much but anyway.

Authorship, just to move onto the third thing we know all the poems are untitled, we know it was an oral culture eventually moving to a literate one. We know poems were written down around the year 1000 so who or what is an author in Old English? And this is a particularly difficult task and question to answer and it is possibly why many, many people shy away from Old English because if you think of a lot of modern literary theory it rests or resides on the facts that you have some contextual information about the poet or the context in which the poet was working.

Not in Old English, it challenges you. So for example if we take Beowulf, Beowulf we know is written down around the year 1000 but the events in Beowulf are around the 6th century. So what does that mean, did someone just decide to write something based 400 years ago and who was it? Were the scribes, the people who wrote it down, were they the authors? It would be handy if it was just one scribe but the manuscript, there’s actually two different hands.

Did the author dictate it? Was the author one of the scribes? it is actually the point where the poem is composed.

We know there are stories in Beowulf which appear such as Seager the dragon slayer in old Norse literature 13th century. So was Beowulf composed around this time at the migration period or
before, or what happened, or is it that they just shared some common stories. Eighth century
well that’s not too far from when they came over, remember Beowulf is set in Scandinavia so it
is talking about their ancestors, their roots it is not too far from then 8th century composition, so
maybe the poems was then. But if it is oral and someone stands up and recites it and then you
learn it and go away, well you can change it.

So basically Beowulf probably changed and changed and changed until it was written down there.
At what point do you say there is an author there? It is the kind of thing that gave Ronan Bart
nightmares.

I’m going to finish with one poem and it is a lovely poem called Deor and I think it kind of brings
things together. It is in you will find it everywhere this is in Crossly-Holland. Deor is the title
we gave it, but of course we give it. Deor also means deer or animal so it is a bit odd really but
basically it is a lovely little poem.

So lets hear literally what happens in it. It is a series of stanzas which is quite odd for Old
English poetry, you actually have stanzas and each stanza tells a bit of a tale from something
which happened in the Germanic past mythology or mainland Germanic history. And then the
last stanza you get these lines from Deor himself and he says “Right I’m now going to tell you
my story I was a poet, I was in the mead hall, I was doing absolutely fine, my job was secure. In
comes another poet and something happened” was it like that sort of battle between Eminem and
the other guy. I don’t know but there was something and he gets ousted and he doesn’t have a job
and now he’s wandering around trying to find a job.

It appears in the Exeter books so it is written down in the year 1000 but it was an earlier date? I
mean would the people in the year 1000 have any idea who some of these characters are because
they go back 5-6 centuries?

So does that argue that actually the poem was written much earlier and it just survived and survived
and then someone around the year 1000 decided to write it down. And the lovely thing about the
poem, each stanza talks about something usually horrible happening and then at the end it uses the
line “that passed away this also may or so may this, that passed away so may this” it is repeated
five or six times in the poem.

So basically what it is saying is things can only get better “Hey look I’m out of a job but that
passed away so may this.”

Why might the Anglo Saxons have liked it? Well there’s the obvious thing, consolation, things
can get better but it does get better after a while. But also these where a people
who’d moved to a completely foreign land and settled down, so maybe they did like old stories
about their roots and where they came from and their ancestors.

Pretty much now people in the States are always trying to trace their roots back because they like
those early stories, it gives them a sense of stability and the Anglo Saxons were in exactly the
same boat.

It is technically good and it is interesting poetry interesting particularly for that refrain at the end
of each stanza.

Who is the author?

Who knows?

The person who wrote it down?

Is there really a person called Deor?

Sounds a bit odd, probably not. There is a similar poem called Wid sif which is quite a long poem
it is not a particularly exciting poem but it tells of this person who goes all around the place and
meets all these people and talks about them like Attila the Hun and so. Chronologically it couldn’t
happen because these people lived too far, unless this person lived for several hundred years and then when you look at the name that means wide journey.

So not really a person called Wid sif is there a person called Deor, we doubt it. But also it is a poem that links and interrelated with other aspects of Anglo Saxon culture going right back to that beginning fusion.

So the opening line “Wayland knew the torment of serpent upon a resolute man he had suffered his hardships, he had sorrow and longing for his companions, pain of winter cold he had often encountered misfortune since [[?? 0:41:32]] constraints upon him subtle sinew bonds upon the better man as that passed over so can this.” The story of Wayland is basically the smith of the gods, he get captured, he gets hamstrung, he has hooks through his ankles he can’t escape, he’s forced to make these things for [[?? 0:42:48]] but that passed away basically he escapes.

That isn’t the consolation, because when he escapes he kills actually before he escapes he kills [[?? 0:41:56]] sons and makes drinking cups out of their skulls, then he escapes he rapes his daughter. The consolation is, which I know is hard pushed but the consolation is she then gave birth to a great Germanic hero. But Wayland the smith appears all over the place.

If you go down the A34 there is the Neolithic tomb which was called Wayland’s Smithy by someone a long time ago. He also appears in old Norse literature, so we start getting those links out and even Wagner wrote something about him not that I advocate Wagner but there we are. And when I think of Wayland I think of the Frank’s casket.

So we’ve got a poem that is dealing with all these issues and it is linking out, it is talking about links to old Norse literature etc, etc, but this is a lovely casket, I think I showed you this in the first lecture because of the runes and there’s Wayland on his little smithy and there’s probably enforcing him to do that and there he is escaping. Classic Germanic pagan myths.

Here is Christ with Mary, here are the three wise men giving him his gifts. So the adoration of the magi, Wayland the Smithy on the same panel from a casket made by the Anglo Saxons some time in the mid 7th century. Fusion, bringing things together. Appropriation whatever you want to call it, balancing their beliefs, somehow getting it all through which of course is where we came in with Halloween.

And if you want nothing else from this lecture just go away with that little dragon image in your head because what I think, the way you think about Old English poetry even on the way the lines are structured, it is that weaving, that interlace pattern that goes on in the poems, even at a grand scale with Beowulf. But also I think this kind of thing and you see it again and again in their art, it captures the way they thought. That everything was linked and if you carry on doing this subject you will branch rapidly out from language and literature into archaeology, art history to theology to all kinds of things. You will move into magic and all things like that.

So you start bringing all these things. It is an incredibly powerful subject and an incredibly wide ranging subject that links and weaves and tangles you up, but you can never escape it.

So summary Old English poems are untitled and anonymous, mostly survive in four manuscripts, circa1000 AD, they range from the dirty riddles right up to the epics like Beowulf. So don’t ever just dismiss then as the boring Dream of the Rood or whatever or something like that.

Tight structure, strict rules, performed orally. The skill of these people is immense. To actually so in and recite that poetry in front of a possibly hostile audience and get away with it and stick to those rules having your A and your B line, your alliteration, keeping up your stress patterns. And then putting things like ring patterns and overall structures is absolutely extraordinary and we are only getting a glimpse of it that was written down.

But it does throw up issues of authorship, audience, performance which you will pick up again, and again, and again in Anglo Saxon literature which is why it is fantastic.
Next week, how does it survive we’ll do a bit more about manuscripts and then we are going to move to prose which some people think is boring but I love prose because it is hilarious and I’m going to talk about three of the famous prose writers briefly Alfred, Aelfric and Wulfstan and you will go away with a bit of advice as to why a pregnant woman should never eat acorns thank you very much.

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