The Birth of English Prose
Dr Stuart Lee
stuart.lee@ell.ox.ac.uk
www.weblearn.ox.ac.uk
Lesson Aims

• Old English Prose - key points
• Historical background
• Authorship / Performance / Audience / Analysis
• The development of prose and prose style
• And, of course, look at some texts
What is prose?
• 1) unstructured form of language, closely connected with the rhythms of everyday speech
• 2) the form of written language that is not organized according to the formal patterns of verse
• 3) matter of fact, commonplace, dull
• 4) don’t know!
• 1) unstructured form of language, closely connected with the rhythms of everyday speech

• 2) the form of written language that is not organized according to the formal patterns of verse

• 3) matter of fact, commonplace, dull

• 4) don’t know!

‘All which is not prose is verse; and all which is not verse is prose.’

‘Good Heavens! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing it.’

Molière
Common characteristics

• Factual, so attempt to achieve clarity
• Explain/record
• Standard vocabulary
• Regular syntax/word-order
• Easy to translate (use of articles, prepositions, clause structures, etc)
Thunder comes from heat and moisture. The sky draws the moisture to it from below and the heat from above; and when they are gathered—the heat and the moisture—within the cloud (sky), then they contest between themselves, with an awful noise, and fire bursts out through lightning.... The hotter the summer, the more thunder and lightning (there is) in the year.

Dunor cymð of hætan ond of wætan. 
Sēo lyft tŷhð ƿone wætan tō hire 
neōdan and ðā hætan ufon; ond 
ƿonne hī ġegaderode bēoð—sēo 
hæte ond se wæta—binnan þære 
lyfte, þonne winnað hī him 
betwŷnan mid ġegeslicum sweège, 
ond þæt fyr āberst ūt ġurh 
liȝette.... Swā hāttere sumor, 
swā mārē dunor ond liȝet on 
ġēare.
Ælfric’s *De Temporibus Anni*

Renas cumað of dære lyft . . . Seo lyft liccað ond atyhð wætan of ealre eordan ond of dære sæ, ond gegaderað to scurum; ond þonne heo ne mæg mare aberan, þonne fealð hit adune
Old English Prose (vs Poetry)

• We have titles
• We have authors
• We have dates
• We have a lot of prose
• In poetry usually only one copy survives
• In prose, numerous copies of the text survive
• But prose still throws up the same questions about authorship, audience, performance, and style
• To fully understand most pieces of literature you need to know the historical and social context of the text and/or author…

• 1) Agree

• 2) Disagree
- Arrive in 5th century
- Conquer and expand 6th century
- 597 St Augustine arrives
- Kingdom of Northumbria dominant in 7th century
- Power shifts to Kingdom of Mercia under Offa in 8th century
- And then…
A piece of Human Skin, taken from the door of Hadstock Church, Essex, is said to be that of a Danish pirate who had pillaged the church probably some 800 years ago. Also part of the ornamental iron work by which the skin was attached here, obtained when the door was repaired in 1530. About the time above mentioned, the Kingdom of East Anglia was harassed by the Danes in an extraordinary manner and when the inhabitants caught any of them, it is said they put them to death with cruel tortures, and tradition of this neighbourhood says that one of them having been taken robbing the church at Hadstock was flogged and his skin nailed on the church door of that place.

Hadstock Church door A.D. 1583.
By the end of the 9th century...
By the end of the 9th century...
Alfred the Great,
King of Wessex (849-99)
‘Defeats’ Vikings at Battle of Edington in 878 AD
Alfred’s Legacy

• Reconstructs after Viking onslaught - new monasteries, new learning (*Preface to the Pastoral Care*)
• Decides that books need to be written in English not Latin - starts Old English prose
• ‘Translates’ books himself (Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*, Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, *Psalms*)
• Provides history books, notably the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*
• Religious and philosophical books
• Plus builds fortifications, remolds army, initiates a Navy…
Other key events

- England reconquered throughout 10th century by House of Wessex
- Major revival of learning in the 950s under the Benedictine Monastic movement (led by St Dunstan, St Æthelwold, St Oswald) - so called ‘Benedictine Revival’
- Produces two great prose writers of the Old English period - Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 950-1010), and Wulfstan of York (c. 960?-1023)
- Anglo-Saxons lose control under Æthelræd Unræd and fully to Cnut in 1016
- Regain control with Edward the Confessor until 1066
So, for example

• What would their views on *Beowulf* be under Alfred (late 9th century) or Æthelræd (late 10th/early 11th) or Cnut (1016)?

• Why does language standardise under the dialect of Late West Saxon in the late 10th century?

• Why do we say English literary prose begins with Alfred?
So, for example

• What would their views on *Beowulf* be under Alfred (late 9th century) or Æthelræd (late 10th/early 11th) or Cnut (1016)?

‘One of the most significant literary achievements of the Anglo-Saxons was the establishment of vernacular prose as an acceptable medium both for the dissemination of knowledge on a wide range of subjects and for the provision of moral instruction and entertainment.’

But before we leave history behind ...

• ... welcome to the 6th century - Hollywood style
What prose texts do you know?
Prose

‘Recording and dissemination of facts’

• Overall only c. 3 million words of Old English survives, of which c. 93% prose, 6% poetry, 1% glosses
• No drama
• Literary and non-literary prose
Some examples
Sample Text 1: Laws

‘If a servant, contrary to his lord’s command, perform servile Work between sunset on Saturday evening and sunset on Sunday evening, he is to compensate his lord eighty sceattas.

...

If a husband sacrifice to devils without his wife’s knowledge he is to forfeit all his property…If a slave sacrifice to devils, he is to compensate six shillings or be flogged’

King Wihtæd of Kent, AD 695
Sample Text 2: Charter

King Edgar Charter (S670/S1450)

‘Ærest up of temese … æfter ðær ealdan dic to cuforde … upp andlang teoburnan … to þære wide here stræt … to ðære ealde stoccene sancte andreas cyricean … on holeburne … andlang stremes be lande 7 be strande’

Ærest - first
andlang - along
here - army
stoccene - built of stocks
burne - stream
Sample Text 2: Charter

King Edgar:

‘Ærest up andlang tec stoccene sam stremes be upp alde

Ærest - first
andlang - along
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Sample text 3: Science

‘The liver is extended on the right side as far as the pit of the belly, it hath five lobes or lappets, it has a hold on the false ribs, it is the material of the blood, and the house and nourishment of the blood; when there is digestion and attenutation of meats, they arrive at the liver, and then they change their hue, and turn into blood; and it casts out the uncleanness which be there, and collects the clean blood, and through four veins principally sends it to the heart…’

Bald’s *Leechbook*
Text 5: Science?

‘Here it begins to tell about the nature of a man, how he becomes man in his mother’s inside. First the man’s brain is formed … then in the sixth week that brain is covered with a membrane on the outside. In the second month the veins are formed - they are separated into 365 shorter and longer; and the blood flows to the feet and into the hands; and he is then articulated in limbs and is altogether developed. In the third month he is a man, except for the soul. In the fourth month he is firm in limbs. In the fifth month he is lively and grows and the mother is at her wit’s end …In the tenth month the woman will not escape with her life if the child is not born, because it turns to a mortal sickness in the abdomen - most often on a Tuesday night…’
‘...you might know which kind of a child a pregnant woman will give birth to. If she walks slowly with hollow eyes, she will give birth to a boy; if she walks quickly and has swollen eyes she will give birth to a girl. Take two plants in hand, that is, a lily and a rose; carry them to the pregnant woman; ask her to take whichever of the plants she wishes; if she takes a lily she will give birth to a boy...if a woman be pregnant for four or five months and then she frequently eats nuts or acorns or any fresh fruits, then sometimes it happens that as a result the child is stupid...another thing about that is: if she eats bull’s flesh or ram’s or buck’s or boar’s or cock’s or gander’s, or any of the animals that can procreate, then sometimes it happens that the child is hump-backed...’
If a man dreams that he sees an eagle settle on his head, that means much honour.

If it seems to him he sees many eagles at once, that shall be harm and assaults and plots of men.

If it seems that he sees bees carrying honey, it shall prove to be the earning of money from wealthy persons.
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If it seems that he sees bees carrying honey, it shall prove to be the earning of money from wealthy persons.
Authorship

• Prose, in the main, originates from a literate culture
• Therefore authorship is often at a time, and place, by an individual
Pick of the Prose Pops

• 5) Byrhtferth of Ramsay 970?-1020?  
*Enchiridion* (Handbook)

• 4) Alfred the Great (871-99)

• 3) Wulfstan of York (?960-1023)

• 2) Ælfric of Eynsham (?950-1010?)

• 1) Anonymous, incl. *Apollonius of Tyre*

• Anglo-Latin writers!
But it’s not that simple
Manuscripts

- Parchment - usually animal skin treated with lime and pumice; ‘vellum’ strictly only calf skin
- Codicology - the study of the book and its construction
- Palaeography - the study of handwriting
- c.90 manuscripts in total (prose and poetry)
A riddle (extract)

An enemy ended my life, deprived me of my physical strength; then he dipped me in water and drew me out again, and put me in the sun where I soon shed all my hair. After that, the knife’s edge bit into me and all my blemishes were scraped away; fingers folded me and the bird’s feather often moved over my brown surface, sprinkling meaningful marks; it swallowed more wood-dye (part of the stream) and again travelled over me leaving black tracks. Then a man bound me, he stretched skin over me and adorned me, with gold ….

(Crossley-Holland, OUP, 1984, p. 241)
a d c x v i

Hercapo aludumburum

a d c x x i

Hercapoadumburum

a d c x x i i

Hercrapoadumburum

a d c x x i i i

Hercrapoeadumburum

a d c x x i i i i

Hercrapoeadumburum
Map of Oxenaforda
Manuscript vs Print

Manuscripts
- no copy is the same but copying is prized as is the authority of the source texts
- text has fluidity - scribes and readers can change at will
- a manuscript copy is a snapshot

Print
- textual fixity
- authorial fixity
- prize originality and invention

M. Swan ‘Authorship and Anonymity’ in Pulsiano and Treherne
A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature
Scribes make copies of copies…..
Leads to a) scribal errors; b) scribal alterations/additions
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Scribes felt at liberty to change a text to suit audience, context, etc

Authorship?
Scribes make copies of copies…

Leads to a) scribal errors; b) scribal alterations/additions

Scribes felt at liberty to change a text to suit audience, context, etc

Authorship?

‘the author is a modern character, no doubt produced by our society as it emerged from the Middle Ages … the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions’

Barthes ‘The Death of the Author’
Audience, Performance, Style
## Possible Answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laws, charters</td>
<td>Noblemen, administrators, clergy, freemen</td>
<td>Oral? &gt; Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical texts</td>
<td>Noblemen, administrators, clergy, freemen</td>
<td>Oral? &gt; Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy, history, grammatical texts, some science treatises</td>
<td>Noblemen, clergy</td>
<td>Reading (schools?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saints’ Lives</td>
<td>Noblemen, clergy</td>
<td>Private reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homilies</td>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>Oral - Monastic Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sermons</td>
<td>Clergy and freemen</td>
<td>Oral - mass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biblical translations</td>
<td>Clergy and noblemen</td>
<td>Private reading?</td>
</tr>
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Prose Development

* Oldest survivor - Law codes of Æthelberht of Kent (560-616)

‘In this year there occurred a great slaughter at Woden’s barrow ’ ASC 592  
(written down in 9th century)

‘All those disasters befall us through bad policy, in that they [the Vikings] were never offered tribute in time nor fought against; but when they had done most to our injury, [only then] were peace and truce made with them…’ ASC 1011

‘The holy mother Mary fed that child and it grew, just as other children do without any sins’ Ælfric De initio creaturæ (CH I)
‘Clumsiness?’

- Parataxis (clauses are not subordinated)
- ‘I came, I saw, I conquered’ (asynthetic - ‘without’) or ‘I came and I saw and I conquered’ (synthetic - ‘with conjunctions’)
- ‘and then King Æthered and his brother Alfred fought against the army at Meretown and they were in two armies and there was great slaughter on either side and there Bishop Heahmund was killed’ ASC 871
- Struggle with conveying action (e.g. Cynewulf and Cyneheard)
- Struggle with translating Latin
Rhetoric
Rhetoric

‘...Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill in Mississippi, from every mountainside, let freedom ring. And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city …’ Martin Luther King, 1963

Underline = repetition
Italics = intensifiers
Bold = audience
Note also the rhythm

(See A. Orchard ‘Oral Tradition’ in K. O’Brien O’Keeffe, Reading Old English Texts (CUP, 1997), pp. 101-23.)
‘…Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill in Mississippi, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city …' Martin Luther King, 1963

When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a new sense of common purpose. Yes we can

America, we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there is so much more to do

This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids
Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.
Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.
Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill in Mississippi,
from every mountainside,
let freedom ring.

And when this happens,
when we allow freedom to ring,
when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet,
from every state and every city …

Martin Luther King, 1963

When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land,
she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal,
new jobs and a new sense of common purpose.

America, you,
much. But

Ours is the chance to answer that call.
This is our moment.
This is our time to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids.

There is eternal burning grimly mingled, and there is eternal terror; there is eternal pain, and there is trial and tribulation, and always continual misery; there is moaning and groaning; there is every kind of humiliation….

Wulfstan (Bethurum, pp. 230-1)
Eadmund se eadiga eastenglan cyning wæs snotor and
Edmund the blessed, king of the East Angles, was wise and
wurðfull and wurðode symble mid æþelum þeawum þone
honourable and always worshipped with excellent conduct the
ælmihtigan God. He wæs eadmod and geþungen and swa anræde
almighty God. He was humble and devout and so steadfast
þurhwunode þæt he nolde abugan to bysmorfullum leahtrum…
he continued, that he would not bow to shameful sins…
Eadmund se eadiga eastenglan cyning wæs snotor and
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honourable and always worshipped with excellent conduct the
ælmihtigan God. He wæs eadmod and gebungen and swa anræde
almighty God. He was humble and devout and so steadfast
burhwunode þæt he nolde abugan to bysmorfullum leahtrum…
he continued, that he would not bow to shameful sins…
How do you analyse prose?

• Think like an Anglo-Saxon:

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas, allegoria,
Moralia, quid agas, quo tendas, anagogial*
(The letter teaches the deed, the allegory what you believe, the moral what you should do, the anaogue what you should strive for)

• Four levels - literal, allegorical, tropological (moral), anagogical (spiritual)

• What is the source text (if any)? How has the author changed the source?

• What devices does the writer use? How ‘advanced’ is the prose?
‘Ælfric's biblical ‘translations’ are like a pool of water that people have dipped into from time to time as has suited their needs ...’
‘[Old English prose is] like a pool of water that people have dipped into from time to time as has suited their needs ...’
Summary

• Old English prose begins with Alfred who was seeking to re-establish learning in England after the Vikings
• Most Old English is prose covering factual documents but it is varied, some nonsensical, some literary
• We know more about authors, audience, and performance
• We still face issues of authorship
• Style was well developed
• It is easy to read ... but is it any good?
• YES!!!!
Next Week

• Welcome to Medieval-land!
• Reuse of Old English by later writers
• Portrayals of the Anglo-Saxons
• Contributions to Old English by Alfred Hitchcock, Stephen Spielberg, and Leonard Bernstein.