History of English Poetry I

From the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epoch</th>
<th>Approx. Dates</th>
<th>Selected Major Writers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old English Literature</td>
<td>450 - 1100</td>
<td>almost all anonymous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle English Literature</td>
<td>1100 - 1500</td>
<td>Geoffrey Chaucer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Renaissance</td>
<td>1500 - 1603</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Early Renaissance</td>
<td>1500 - 1558</td>
<td>Sir Th.Wyatt, Earl of Surrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Elizabethan Age</td>
<td>1558 - 1603</td>
<td>Sir P. Sidney, E. Spenser, W.Shakespeare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 17th Century</td>
<td>1603 - 1688</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Early 17th Century</td>
<td>1603-1640</td>
<td>John Donne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Civil War and Commonwealth</td>
<td>1640-1660</td>
<td>John Milton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Restoration</td>
<td>1660–1688</td>
<td>J.Milton, J. Dryden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 18th Century</td>
<td>1688 – 1780</td>
<td>Pope, Defoe, Swift,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanticism</td>
<td>1780 – 1830</td>
<td>Blake, Wordsworth, Byron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Victorian Age</td>
<td>1837 - 1901</td>
<td>Browning, Tennyson, Hardy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War I and Modernism</td>
<td>1914 - 1945</td>
<td>T.E. Hulme, T.S.Eliot, W.B.Yeats, Ezra Pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1945</td>
<td>1945 -</td>
<td>S.Heaney, T. Hughes etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Old English Literature

c. 450 – 1100
Cultural Background:

- Christianization
  - competing, incompatible values
  - semantic ambiguity, e.g.:
    - witega = “wise man” and “prophet”
    - fullian = “consecrate” and “baptize”
    - firen = “crime” and “sin”
  - amalgamation of Christian and Germanic values
Old English Poetry (450 - 1100)

• anonymous, mostly oral

→ social function: part of gatherings; scop

→ function of scop: entertainment plus establishment of a collective tradition

→ poetry: collective memory and reassurance

→ poetry preserves values and identity
Four great manuscripts:

*Beowulf*; *Junius* (or Caedmon Manuscript); Exeter Book; Vercelli Book

→ contain c. two thirds of the known Old English poetry
metrical form of Old-English poetry:
lines divided into two half-lines;
alliteration

e.g. Caedmon’s Hymn
• earliest extant Old English poem; ~ 660-680
• text preserved in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731)
• example of oral-formulaic poetry
• Germanic praise (usually for a secular lord) is used in order to praise the Christian God
Caedmon's Hymn (earliest extant Old English poem (~ 660-680)
(contained in Beda's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, 731)

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard,
meotodes meahte and his modgeþanc,
weorc wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwæs,
ece drihten, ord onstealde.
He ærest sceop ielda bearnum
heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend;
ďa middangeard moncynnes weard,
ece drihten, æfter teode
firum foldan, frea ælmihtig

Now we must praise heaven-kingdom's guardian,
the measurer's might and his mind-plans,
the work of the Glory-Father, when he of wonders of every one,
eternal Lord, established the beginning.
He first created for men's sons
heaven as a roof holy Creator,
then middle-earth, mankind's guardian,
eternal Lord, afterwards made
For men earth, Master almighty
form:
- two balanced phrases with four stressed syllables, three of which alliterate.
- lines are units of idea/thought
  ➔ easy to memorize
- half-lines are often formulaic
- simple contents: "Let me now praise God the Creator" (1-4), and "God created Heaven, earth, and man" (5-9).
• technique of variation:
• e.g.: God = weard, frea, drihten
• originally secular words acquire a religious significance in compounds (heofonrices weard, ece drihten, frea aelmihtig)
• richness of vocabulary
**Beowulf (~800)**

- heroic, epic poem
- celebrates courage, deeds and ethos of an ideal Germanic warrior
- hero as a model for a fighting society
- embodiment of the best virtues of a people
  → identification with the ethos he represents
Contents:
King Hrothgar (c. 500)
Heorot
Grendel
Beowulf
Grendel’s mother
return
Beowulf reigns for 50 years as a wise king
dragon
Beowulf fights him
Beowulf dies of the dragon’s poisonous bite
praise and burial of Beowulf
Composition of the manuscript

- composed between c. 521 (the approximate date of the death of the historical model for the character Hygelac) and 1026 (more or less the latest possible date of the manuscript itself)
- where? not sure
- author? one or several?
- coherence or combination of formerly independent parts?
- e.g. J.R.R. Tolkien “It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings […], the contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death.” (“Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics”, 1936)
- symbolic coherence (Grendel and Dragon as embodiments of evil)
- continuity in style and diction
Stylistic Features

Beowulf employs all genres of Old English poetry:

- genealogy
- burial speech
- dialogical exchange
- moral address
- elegiac review
- vivid descriptions (e.g. of landscapes or battles)

Other characteristics: contrasts, parallels, episodes, digressions, moments of rememberance and foreshadowing

→ simple plot gains timeless depth and epic dimension
KENNING

The following is from Edward B. Irving Jr. (1969), page 32:

• An important feature of the vocabulary of Old English poetry was the poetic compound, a traditional form of concentrated metaphor. The most striking form of compound to us is the kenning (a term borrowed for convenience from Old Norse). The following are examples of kennings: hronrad, "wale riding place," or ganotes bæth, "seabird's bath," for the sea; beadoleoma, "battle-light," or hamera laf, "what the (smith's) hammers leave," or guthwine, "war friend," for a sword; woruldcandel, "world-candel," for the sun, and mere-hrægl, "sea-garment," for a ship's sail. Such compounds and phrases formed part of the inherited poetic language of Anglo-Saxon poets. No doubt individual poets invented new ones from time to time, but most of these expressions were as stereotyped as Homer's rosy-fingered dawn. The Beowulf poet differs from other poets of the time only in the relatively large number of compounds he uses and the imaginative way in which he uses them. One might well expect so conventional a style to lack freshness and vitality, but for some reason it does not. The very compression of the kennings and of phrases like them succeeds in charging the verse with a consistently high level of metaphorical energy. Perhaps one might even say that the mosaic of the larger poem is build up out of the many tiny "poems" in the form of these expressions, giving the surface a texture of interesting depth.
A more subtle vehicle for irony typical of Anglo-Saxon poetry is the "kenning," a formal compound metaphor that uses common words to describe simple, everyday concepts. It is through the often complex combinations of these common words, however, that the kenning supports the ironic traditions of Old Germanic literature. To understand the role of the kenning, one must realise that the compound metaphor is not merely a word substitution. Instead, the kenning frequently represents more than the actual subject of the metaphor itself by implying the potential of the idea or object it describes. In short, the whole of the kenning is greater than the sum of its parts. The resulting construction therefore provides an intimate, contextual detail and a significantly emotional connotation that a less formal metaphor could not accomplish. In Beowulf, for example, the feud between the Heatho-Bard, Ingeld, and his father-in-law, Hrothgar, is referred to as "sword-hate," which conveys more than mere violence and more than just enmity. Instead, the audience is left with images of emotional hostility that culminate in force of arms. Beowulf himself describes the battle history of the Heatho-Bards as "shield-play," indicating an almost light-hearted view of warfare, but at the same time implying their traditionally defensive posture in combat.
Significance of *Beowulf*

- representation of a mythic past, of old virtues and values → appeals to identification and emulation in the present
- Beowulf as ideal warrior and wise king
- fight good vs. evil (even if Beowulf dies in the end, his moral power remains impressive)
  → topic facilitates the transformation of Germanic material into Christian values:
Germanic and Christian Elements

Grendel = godless creature (descendant of Cain)  
→ fought by human virtue (Beowulf)  
threat exerted by godlessness  
Beowulf as self-sacrificial redeemer  
resemblance to arch-angel Michael  
appraisal of Christian virtues (moderation, self-denial, devotion, self-sacrifice) → Beowulf and Hrothgar mingle Germanic heroic ideals with Christian ideas  
**wyrd**

- (cf. weird = supernatural connotations; here: pejorative)
- motor of the action/plot: wyrd = fate → a power that lies without human power and will
- in *Beowulf*, two concepts of *wyrd* are manifest:
"...It is worth stressing that the modern notion of linear time was still something of a scientific abstraction among even the Christian Anglo-Saxons, whose attitudes to life and death seem to have been governed by the world-view of their heathen forbears. They believed that at a given time some men...were doomed to die - a reaction to the uncertainties of warfare and accidents not unlike that of many modern soldiers who have faith in the idea that "if it's got your name on it, there's nothing you can do"...Tied in with this idea is the concept of *wyrd* 'the course of events' which is the underlying structure of time; it is this pattern which the Anglo-Saxons tried to read in the world about them....As the *Beowulf* poet observed:

‘*Wyrd often saves an undoomed hero as long as his courage is good*’

(lines 572-3)

The implication is that while a man's courage holds out, he has a hope of winning through since *wyrd* 'the way things happen' will often work to help such a man, as long as he is not doomed; conversely if a man *is* doomed then not even his courage can help him stand against 'the course of events'." (Stephen Pollington, *The English Warrior from Earliest Times to 1066*, pp166-167)
**wyrd**

- Germanic concept: hero must prove himself by facing *wyrd* heroically

also: *wyrd* as a web or knot; no linear concept!

In *Beowulf*, this idea is integrated into Christian belief in God:

- *wyrd* is not blind and unescapable but subjected to the will of an omnipotent God
Middle English Literature (1100 - 1500)

• 1066: Norman Conquest

• French language of court and administration

• 1167: Oxford University; 1209: Cambridge

• Drama: miracle plays and mystery plays performed in market square (originally religious drama)

• Chaucer (~1343 – 1400) as the most important Middle English writer