

Beowulf: Language and Poetics Quick Reference Sheet

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 examples 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 made 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 unfamiliar 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*, you can see two capital wuns in the first line. They are the second and fifth letters: "H[wyn]ÆT [wyn]E GARDE." When looking at the manuscript page, you'll also notice one additional unfamiliar looking letter, "ƿ" which is the letter "g."

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 "Ʒæt wæs god cyning," which is repeated multiple times in *Beowulf*. "Ʒ" 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."

Chapters 1 and 2 of *The Electronic Introduction to Old English*, <http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/research/rawl/IOE/index.html>, provide a more detailed explanation of Old English and its relation to Modern English, and chapter 16.2 provides more information on the Old English alphabet, including a picture of all the letters in order.

Poetics

Note: No one translation of *Beowulf* 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.

Alliteration: Alliteration is the repetition of stressed sounds, particularly consonants from the beginning of words or syllables. Poetically, alliteration can have a similar function as rhyme. An example of alliteration is the tongue-twister "She sells seashells by the sea shore."

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.

kennings: Kennings are a special form of compounding that are metaphoric in meaning. For example, the kenning *banhus* (*ban* + *hus*), literally "bone-house," refers to the human body; *hronrad* (*hron* + *rad*), literally "whale's road," refers to the sea; and *rodore's candel*, literally "sky's candle," refers to the sun.

Formulas: Like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* makes use of stock phrases, known as formulas. Formulas are believed to be ready-made phrases which 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 everyone agrees 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 gearдум* "young in the courtyard" (line 13), *folce to frofre* "as a comfort to the

people" (line 14), and *bearn Ecgþeowes* "Ecþeow'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.

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 maþelode, bearn Ecgþeowes* (Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecþeow). 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 þa æþelinga bearn
steap stanhliðo stige nearwe
enge anpaðas uncuð gelad
neowle næssas 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 can not 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 Ecþeow's son, we are much more likely to remember who Ecþeow 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.

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. 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 Riming Poem.") Here is an example of Old English alliterative verse, taken from *Beowulf*:

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
monegum maegþum meodosetla ofteah.

In the first line, *Oft Scyld Scefing* is the first half-line and *sceapena þreatum* is the second half-line. *Scyld*, *scefing*, *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.

For a more detailed discussion of Old English poetics, including the rhythm of Old English alliterative verse, see chapters 13 and 14 of *The Electronic Introduction to Old English*, <http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/research/rawl/IOE/index.html>