



Lincoln College  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

## PRELIMS PAPER 2: EARLY MEDIEVAL LITERATURE 650–1350

Dr Rebecca Menmuir ([rebecca.menmuir@lincoln.ox.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.menmuir@lincoln.ox.ac.uk))

2025–26



Eagles (important ‘beasts of battle’ in Old English poetry) in a medieval bestiary (a compendium of animals).

Bodleian MS Ashmole 1511 (‘The Ashmole Bestiary’), 1200s. [Scroll through the whole manuscript here!](#)

## CONTENTS OF THIS DOCUMENT

1. Key information
2. Reading and resources
3. Outline for Michaelmas, Hilary, and Trinity Terms 2025–26

## 1. KEY INFORMATION

### COURSE AIMS

Welcome to Prelims Paper 2! This paper will introduce you to the very earliest literature written in English. This spans the language known most commonly as ‘Old English’ but also as ‘Anglo Saxon’ or ‘pre-conquest English’ (c. AD 650–1110) through seven centuries of literature to ‘Early Middle English’ (c. AD 1100–1350). As you can imagine, there is an enormous amount of historical, literary, and linguistic change over these seven centuries, and a fantastic variety in the literature of the period. You will encounter epics, heroic poetry, laments, riddles, religious poems, debates, and much more. This paper’s lectures, classes, and tutorials will approach the fundamentals of the Old English language, its contexts, and literary themes and devices. You will question what we mean by both ‘English’ and ‘Literature’, and build a firm foundation for the rest of your degree.

Oxford is unique in offering an alternative pathway through its English degree: in second- and third-year students can choose to take ‘Course II’, which focuses solely on earlier literature (650–1550) and the history of the English language.

Our set texts are the Old English *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Wanderer*, *Beowulf*, and the Early Middle English *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

### TUTOR CONTACT DETAILS

Dr Rebecca Menmuir ([rebecca.menmuir@lincoln.ox.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.menmuir@lincoln.ox.ac.uk)), she/her.

I am typically able to respond to emails between 9am-5pm Monday-Friday, and will always reply as soon as I am able. I do not have office hours: if you wish to discuss the course, please email to make an appointment.

### TEACHING FORMAT AND ESSAYS

We will have weekly classes (in groups) and tutorials (in pairs or threes). Attending the Faculty lectures will be essential.

### ASSESSMENT

At the end of your first year (‘Prelims’) there will be a 3-hour exam, in which you will be required to write a commentary on a passage of an Old English set text and two essays. You are given a choice of questions for both the commentary and the essay sections.

Once you are in Oxford, it will be useful to become acquainted early on with the exam format and types of questions. Past papers are hosted on SOLO, Oxford's online catalogue platform: <https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections-and-resources/solo>.

## 2. READING AND RESOURCES

You will need to buy a copy of Mitchell and Robinson / Burrow and Turville-Petre / Treharne (all listed below). Once at Oxford, you will have access to many extensive University libraries, including the Bodleian Library, the English Faculty Library, and your College Library. The Bodleian is a 'legal deposit' library, meaning it contains a copy of every book published in the UK and Ireland! You will be able to use SOLO, Oxford's library catalogue to search for physical books (among its many other functions). Many books are now available as e-Books on SOLO, although it is crucial to develop your skills in navigating libraries and physical books.

If you have trouble sourcing any of the items listed below before you arrive in Oxford, especially those under 'essential summer reading', please email me and I shall do my best to help.

### ESSENTIAL SUMMER READING

Set texts and essentials:

**Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English* [8th edition] (2011).**

Contains *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Wanderer*, *Beowulf* (ll. 702–897, the set passage)

**John Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English* [3rd edition] (2005).**

Contains *The Owl and the Nightingale* (ll. 1–390, the set passage)

**Elaine Treharne, *Old and Middle English, c.890-c.1450: An Anthology* [3rd edition] (2010).**

Mitchell and Robinson / Burrow and Turville-Petre are the set editions of this paper's key texts, and Treharne contains almost all of the other primary readings we will encounter (in the original and in translation). It is therefore essential to acquire a copy of these before term begins. Familiarise yourself with the layout, read through the introductions to the language, look up unfamiliar words and technical terms, and have a look at the set texts in particular.

Translations:

Read the translations of *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Wanderer*, and *Beowulf* in Treharne's *Old and Middle English*.

I strongly encourage you to read through the Old English works in Treharne, especially *Cædmon's Hymn*, *The Seafarer*, *Deor*, the selection of *Exeter Book Riddles*, *Judith*. Many of these are only one or two pages long!

Another edition of Old English verse, in translation only, is:

**A. C. Bradley, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (1991)** – you may find it especially useful to compare how the same text is translated in Treharne compared to Bradley.

Another good edition of *Beowulf* is:

**R. M. Liuzza, ed. and trans., *Beowulf: Second Edition (with facing-page translation)* (2013)** – a verse translation. Take care to get the one with the Old English included, as Liuzza's translation is also available on its own.

You could also read **Seamus Heaney, trans., *Beowulf* (1999)**, which is a very engaging introduction to the text and a spectacular piece of poetry – but not as closely linked to the Old English as Liuzza, and won't help you get as much of a feel for the Old English.

Read through a translation of *The Owl and the Nightingale* at:

<http://wpwt.soton.ac.uk/trans/owl/owltrans.htm>.

Important overview:

**Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (2006).**

Reading through this Companion as much as you can will give you a firm grounding for just about everything we will cover – thematically and contextually – over the year!

Old English language:

The following resources will help you get to grips with the language over the summer. While there are many excellent introductions to Old English language, we will primarily be referring to (and working from):

**Peter S. Baker, *Introduction to Old English: Third Edition* (2012).**

Working very well in conjunction with this text are Peter Baker's online resources at:

<http://www.oldenglishaerobics.net/>

Particularly helpful here:

- Under 'Miscellaneous Resources', find 'The Magic Sheet of Old English Declensions'. This provides all the basics of Old English grammar on one A4 page.
- To test your understanding, complete (as a minimum) the following exercises in the 'Workout Room': 'What case should it be?', 'Nouns and pronouns', 'Pronoun paradigm drill (elementary)', 'Noun paradigm drill (elementary)', 'Verb paradigm drill (elementary)', 'Subjects and verbs', 'Pronouns and their antecedents', 'Nouns and their modifiers', 'Alliteration', 'Rhythmic types'.

It is imperative to check and reinforce your understanding of grammatical terminology, all of which is contained in Baker and his Old English Aerobics website. You should also read through the 'Introduction to Traditional Grammar' here, especially 'parts of speech':

<http://wpwt.soton.ac.uk/notes/grammar.htm>

Make sure you know terms such as: 'noun', 'verb', 'adjective', 'adverb', 'pronoun', 'preposition', 'conjunction', 'definite article', 'past participle', 'present participle', 'indicative mood', 'subjunctive mood', 'imperative mood', 'nominative case', 'accusative case', 'genitive case', 'dative case'.

n.b. this will be essential for your Prelims Paper 1 work, too.

Alphabet note:

At first sight, Old English can look unfamiliar – more like German or Icelandic. The French linguistic influence that followed the Norman Conquest (1066) has yet to enter the scene. Old English has some characters no longer used in Modern English, most noticeably *ð* ('eth') and *þ* ('thorn'), both of which are pronounced with a 'th' sound.

A useful dictionary;

**Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1898–1921)**, searchable online at <http://www.bosworthtoller.com/>. For looking up individual words, and the glossary at the back of Mitchell and Robinson also works as a mini-dictionary.

Early Middle English language:

Our focus in Michaelmas will be Old English and so your focus over summer should be getting to grips with that language. In Hilary Term we will move on to Early Middle English: you will have the winter vacation to prepare, but it is a short vacation and you will have many other things to do!

Early Middle English is closer to modern English, but it still requires language learning. There are different letter forms: the eth (*ð*, 'th' sound) and thorn (*þ*, 'th' sound) are still in use, as well as yogh (*ȝ*, a softer g sound, sometimes as in *loch*). Vocabulary is often very

different to modern English. You will find Early Middle English an essential stepping stone for Middle English (e.g. Chaucer) later in your degree. Read:

**Burrow and Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*.**

- Read at least Part 1, pp. 1–73.

**R. D. Fulk, *An Introduction to Middle English: Grammar and Texts* (2012).**

- Read at least ‘Historical overview: The transition from Old to Middle English’. Fulk’s book spans the twelfth to the fifteenth century, and therefore captures a broader change than our course (which ends at 1350). The texts contained in ‘Twelfth Century’ and ‘Thirteenth Century’ will be worth a read (and there is a version of *The Owl and the Nightingale* in there too).

#### **FURTHER READING**

Cambridge Elements:

A developing scholarly form is the ‘minigraph’, shorter academic books. ‘Cambridge Elements’ has a series of relevant minigraphs called ‘England in the Early Medieval World’:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/elements/england-in-the-early-medieval-world>.

See especially the recent publications, *Literary Form in Early Medieval England* and *Natural and Supernatural in Early Medieval England*.

Language:

**Mark Atherton, *Complete Old English: Teach Yourself* (London, 2012).**

**Hana Videen, *The Wordhord: Daily Life in Old English* (2021). [A fun introduction]**

Historical contexts:

Bear in mind that ‘the Anglo-Saxon period’ in historical terms is long – it begins with the migration of the Germanic tribes of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes into Britain in the fifth century, but most of the texts we will discuss are written down (and many of them possibly composed) in the later tenth/early eleventh centuries, not long before the Norman Conquest in 1066.

Try to stay aware of this as you learn about the period. History books begin with early events such as the conversion to Christianity in the seventh century. As a context for much of the literature we will be looking at, these events are fairly remote. Make sure you persevere to sections about mid- and later Anglo-Saxon England, especially Viking

attacks from the eighth century, King Alfred's reign and the creation of the Danelaw in the ninth century, and the Benedictine Reform in the tenth century.

**John Blair, *The Anglo-Saxon Age: A Very Short Introduction* (2000).**

**Miri Rubin, *The Middle Ages: A Very Short Introduction* (2014).**

**Eleanor Parker, *Winters in the World: A Journey Through the Anglo-Saxon Year* (2022). [a fun read aimed at the public, rather than an academic book]**

See also Eleanor Parker's excellent blog about all things medieval, often featuring local Oxford detail:

<https://aclerkofoxford.blogspot.com/>.

Literary contexts:

**Hugh Magennis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature* (2011).**

Biblical contexts:

For perhaps any course in English Literature, but certainly in Old and Middle English literature, it is crucial to have an understanding of biblical traditions. Reading the Bible in any version (e.g. the King James) will be helpful, especially Genesis, Job, and the Psalms in the Old Testament and the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelations in the New Testament.

For the details, the most appropriate version to use for this period is the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate (for an online edition of the Latin and English alongside each other, go to <http://www.latinvulgate.com>).

For an overview of Christian scriptural traditions:

**John Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction* (2000)**

See also:

***The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* [3rd edition] (2013)**

– e.g. entries on 'Trinity', 'Sacrament', 'Eucharist', 'Gospel', 'Liturgy', 'Office, Divine', 'Mattins', 'Vespers', 'Parish', 'Annunciation of the BVM', 'Incarnation', 'Harrowing of Hell', 'Sacrifice', 'Martyr', 'Saints, devotion to the', 'Anglo-Saxon Church'.

The field of Old English scholarship:

Old English scholarship has a long history, much of which was shaped at Oxford. You will recognise J. R. R. Tolkien, tutor at Oxford, whose 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics' helped develop critical appreciation and understanding of *Beowulf* and beyond. Here is



an entertaining recent piece about how Tolkien and C. S. Lewis shaped the Oxford English course, especially how Old English is taught:

**Simon Horobin, “Never Trust a Philologist’: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and the Place of Philology in English Studies’, *Review of English Studies* 75.2 (2024): 209–226.**

More seriously, debates have been raging over the last few years around the long-established scholarly usage of the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ to describe the historical period and the people who inhabited pre-Conquest England. Two perspectives and overviews:

**Michael Wood, ‘Is the Term “Anglo-Saxon” Racist?’, *History Extra* (Nov 2019):**  
<https://www.historyextra.com/period/anglo-saxon/professor-michael-wood-anglo-saxon-name-debate-is-term-racist/>.

**Mary Rambaran-Olm, ‘Misnaming the Medieval: Rejecting “Anglo-Saxon” Studies’, *History Workshop* (Nov 2019):**  
<http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/misnaming-the-medieval-rejecting-anglo-saxon-studies/>.

Early Middle English:

**Simon Horobin and Jeremy Smith, *An Introduction to Middle English* (2002).**

**Wendy Scase, ‘Re-inventing the Vernacular’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Literature 1100–1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (2009), pp. 11–24.**

Medievalism:

Medievalism is literature, art, architecture, or other work which looks back to the medieval in some way: every single one of your lectures, classes, and individual readings is a form of medievalism, shaped by how we currently understand the medieval in scholarship and popular culture. Medievalism is having a ‘moment’: many of the texts listed here are from the past 10 years.

In Prelims Paper 2, you are permitted to write on medievalism in your exam, as long as you also show a good understanding of the original Old English text.

General:

**Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, eds, *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (2014).**

- Nearly all of these entries are worth looking through, but esp. Authenticity, Authority, Christianity, Heresy, Memory, Middle, Play, Simulacrum, Trauma.

**David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (2015).**

- Again, the whole book is worth a read, but especially Part II: Time, Space, Self, Society.



**Tison Pugh and Susan Aronstein, *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past* (2012).**

**Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, eds, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (2013).**

**Amy Jeffs, *Wild: Tales From Early Medieval Britain* (2022).**

- Creative adaptations of stories from the period.

**W. H. Auden, *The Wanderer* (1930).**

**Caroline Bergvall, *Drift* (2014).**

- Reimagines the Old English *The Seafarer*.

**Seamus Heaney, *The Wanderer*, in *Stations* (1975).**

- A curious short prose poem from the translator of *Beowulf*.

**Ezra Pound, *The Seafarer* (1911).**

**Maria Dahvana Headley, *The Mere Wife* (2018).**

- A retelling of *Beowulf* set in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America.

#### **OTHER RESOURCES**

***In Our Time*, a radio series since 1998:**

**<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qykl>.**

See esp. episodes on *Beowulf*, the Venerable Bede, Alfred and the Battle of Edington, Athelstan, St Hilda, the Danelaw, the Trinity, Miracles, Prayer, Heaven, Hell, the Fall, the Apocalypse, St Paul.

***You're Dead to Me*, a historical comedy podcast:**

**<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07mdbhg>.**

Some excellent medieval content and good for context and the medieval world (e.g. 'Medieval Christmas', 'Medieval Animals', 'Old Norse Literature'), but no specific Old English episode (yet).

**Dr Thijs Porck on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@thijsporck>.**

Channel about Old English, Early Medieval England, and Tolkien.

***The History of English*, a podcast: <https://historyofenglishpodcast.com/>.**

### 3. OUTLINE FOR MICHAELMAS AND HILARY TERMS 2025–26

#### Michaelmas Term 2024

- Week 1      **Class.** An introduction to Old English.
- Week 2      **Class.** *The Dream of the Rood* and Old English grammar.
- Week 3      **Class.** *The Dream of the Rood* and Christ as hero.
- Week 4      **Class.** *The Dream of the Rood*, poetics, and Old English objects.
- Week 5      **Tutorial.** Commentary on *The Dream of the Rood*.
- Week 6      **Class.** *The Wanderer* and the Old English mode of complaint.
- Week 7      **Class.** *The Wanderer* and old- to modern-English elegies.
- Week 8      **Class.** *The Wanderer* and a language recap.
- Tutorial.** Essay on topics from the term.

**Vacation essay**      Commentary on *The Wanderer*, and an essay on Old English riddles.

#### Hilary Term 2025

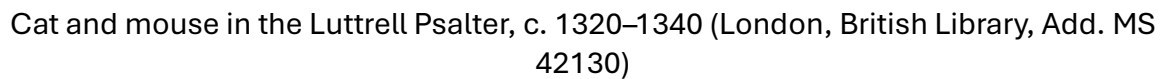
- Week 1      **Tutorial.** Based on your vacation commentary and essay.
- Week 2      **Class.** *Beowulf* and monsters.
- Week 3      **Class.** *Beowulf* and heroes.
- Week 4      **Class.** *Beowulf* and gender.
- Week 5      **Tutorial.** An essay on *Beowulf* and beyond.
- Class.** An introduction to Early Middle English.
- Week 6      **Class.** *The Owl and the Nightingale* and Early Middle English themes.
- Week 7      **Class.** *The Owl and the Nightingale* and material contexts.
- Week 8      **Tutorial.** Commentary on *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

**Vacation essay**      **Essay.** Commentary on a set text, and an essay on early medieval romance.

#### Trinity Term 2025

- Week 1      **Tutorial.** Based on your vacation commentary and essay.

I will be happy to mark any commentary or essay practice plans ad hoc. I will also be available for meetings to discuss Prelims 2 – and, at this stage, Course II, which is a medieval-only pathway that some students choose to take up in their second and third years.



11