Lincoln College

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

PRELIMS PAPER 2: EARLY MEDIEVAL LITERATURE 650–1350

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2026–27



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!

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1. KEY INFORMATION

About the course

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 650–1100) 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*.

This paper is taught over Michaelmas and Hilary Terms. There will be weekly classes in groups, and tutorials in pairs or threes. Attending 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.

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 Humanities 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 will do my best to help.

ESSENTIAL SUMMER READING

Set texts and translations

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).

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

***The Owl and the Nightingale* translation**:
http://wpwt.soton.ac.uk/trans/owl/owltrans.htm

Mitchell and Robinson / Burrow and Turville-Petre are the set editions of this paper's key texts. 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. Make sure to get used to the glossary at the back of Mitchell and Robinson.

I strongly encourage you to read through the Old English works in Treharne, especially the set texts, but browse at your leisure.

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/

Browse the Anthology, 'The Magic Sheet of Old English Declensions' (under 'Miscellaneous Resources'), and work through the exercises in the 'Workout Room'.

You will need to arrive for Michaelmas Term with a firm understanding of grammatical terminology, especially parts of speech (noun, verb, etc); parts of the sentence (subject, object, etc); and case systems (nominative, accusative, etc); . As well as Baker's book, see the 'Introduction to Traditional Grammar' here:

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

For an Old English dictionary, use:

www.bosworthtoller.com: Bosworth-Toller's *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1898 – 1921) digitised.

https://dictionary.doe.utoronto.ca/doe/: The *Dictionary of Old English*. An ongoing project and better than B-T, but currently only spanning words from A to Le.

Early Middle English language

Our focus in Michaelmas will be Old English, and your summer focus should be preparing for that language. In Hilary Term we will move on to Early Middle English (c. AD 1100–1350), which is closer to modern English, but 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 lo*ch*). 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

Historical and literary overviews

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

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

William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View: An Introduction* [3rd edition] (2012).

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

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

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

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

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

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).

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

***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'.

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 2026–27

Michaelmas Term 2026

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 Anglo-Saxon themes.
Week 4	**Class**. *The Dream of the Rood* and Old English versification.
Week 5	**Tutorial**. Commentary on *The Dream of the Rood*.
Week 6	**Class**. *The Wanderer* and genre.
Week 7	**Class**. *The Wanderer* and a grammar recap.
Week 8	**Class**. *The Wanderer* and 'medievalism'.
	Tutorial. Essay on Old English wisdom poetry.

Vacation essay Essay on Old English riddles.

Hilary Term 2027

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 on early medieval romance.

Trinity Term 2027

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

Beyond Week 1, there are no set classes or tutorials in Trinity Term. I will arrange Prelims 2 revision classes which you are advised to attend.



Cat and mouse in the Luttrell Psalter, c. 1320–1340 (London, British Library, Add. MS 42130)

See you in Michaelmas!