learning about language

THE EARLIEST ENGLISH

AN INTRODUCTION TO OLD ENGLISH LANGUAGE

CHRIS McCULLY & SHARON HILLES

The Earliest English

LEARNING ABOUT LANGUAGE

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An Introduction to Old English Language

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Terminology

List of symbols and a note on conventions

While we have tried to keep symbols and abbreviations to a minimum, no one writing on or working with language, particularly on the earliest, and thus reconstructed, forms of English, can do so without making systematic use of some scholarly apparatus. Following long-established convention, for instance, we cite written forms in italics, as in Old English *rōd*, cross. We also make use of the following conventions of transcription:

/ / phonemic transcription, e.g. /pɪn/, pin
[ ] phonetic transcription, e.g. [pʰɪn]
< > graphemes, e.g. <pin>

(For a fuller account of phonemes, that is, underlying sound segments, see Units 1 and, particularly, 2 (consonants and vowels) and 5 (vowel length). On syllable structure and stress in (Old) English, see Unit 5.)

A macron (length-mark) appears over long vowels in their orthographic (written) forms, as in Old English *dōm*, judgement (phonemic /do:m/). On the analysis of long vowels as they appear in syllables, see especially Unit 5.

A single asterisk * marks either a historically reconstructed or an ungrammatical form; the context will make it clear which is intended.

Morphemes – for the present, morphemes can be taken to be 'meaningful parts of words' – are, where necessary, separated by hyphens, as in *cyning-as*, kings, where *cyning* is the lexical root and *-as* the nominative plural inflection.

Abbreviations

(a) Languages (and some varieties of languages)

AmE American English

We use this label as a convenient, though over-simple, cover-term for varieties of English spoken today in large parts of the North American continent. The cover-term is used in a sense equivalent to how linguists might deploy the term 'GA' – 'General American'

A-N Anglo-Norman
BrE British English

Again, we use this label as a convenient, though over-simple, cover-term for varieties of English spoken today in the British Isles. Usually, and with our intended readerships and their learning histories in mind, we will use the terms 'BrE' and 'AmE' for the purposes of explicational contrast. Thus, for example, we shall be able to contrast 'AmE speakers', many of whom have the phonological feature of rhoticity, or post-vocalic /r/, with BrE speakers, many of whom do not have such a phonological feature as parts of their grammars. We're well aware of the over-simple nature of such contrasts, but it's difficult to avoid making them during the course of a textbook intended to get you thinking – perhaps for the first time – about the nature of 'Englishes'

Du Dutch
E English
eME early Middle English
eModE early Modern English
F French
G German
Gmc Germanic
Ice Icelandic
IE Indo-European
L Latin
ME Middle English
N Northern
Nbr Northumbrian
NGmc North Germanic
OE Old English
OHG Old High German
OIce Old Icelandic
OLG Old Low German
ON Old Norse
OS Old Saxon
PDE Present-day English
PrGmc Proto-Germanic
WGmc West Germanic
WS West Saxon

(1) Generally, where you encounter 'PD' as part of an abbreviation of a language, you can gloss it as 'present-day', thus PDG, Present-day German
(2) Generally, where you encounter 'L' as the first part of an abbreviation of a language, you can gloss it as 'late', thus LL, Late Latin, LME, Late Middle English

(3) Generally, where you encounter 'e' as part of an abbreviation of a language, you can gloss it as 'early', thus eME, early Middle English

(b) Other terms

In our experience, beginning students can often be baffled by the use of even commonly used scholarly abbreviations, and very often misuse these pieces of equipment in written assignments. Here are some of the most common:

c Latin *circa*, about (thus 'c1000', around the year 1000)
cf Latin *compare*, confer
eg Latin *exempli gratia*, for example
ff following pages
fn. footnote, plural *fnn*., footnotes
ie Latin *id est*, that is
IPA International Phonetic Alphabet
MS manuscript, plural *MSS.* manuscripts
n note, plural *nn.* notes
nb Latin *nota bene*, note well
pp pages
pret preterite – another word for past tense form of a verb
RP Received Pronunciation [RP is, or was, a prestige spoken variety of British English. For decades of the 20th century it was considered to be a spoken 'standard'.]

[NB. If you're going to use grammatical terms to describe the structures and functions of the English language, there is one spelling mistake which students commonly make. The word <**auxiliary**> is spelt with ONE <l>. It isn't spelled *<auxilliary>, nor yet *<auxillary>, however much you might want it to be.]

(c) Abbreviations used for grammatical concepts

The meaning of the abbreviations will become clear as we work:

acc accusative
adj adjective
dat dative
fem feminine
gen genitive
ind indicative
masc masculine
neut neuter
nom nominative

NOM nominal (group)
NP noun phrase
obj object
pl plural
ppl past participle
prep preposition
pres present
sb subjunctive
sg singular
VP verb phrase

Using this book

This book is organised into eight units, with an Interlude after Unit 4. Each unit is intended to generate sufficient work to occupy one week's study, although of course the time taken to complete each unit will depend on whether you're studying alone, or with others, in a university seminar, or in a school or college classroom. It will also depend on whether you're working through this book as part of the American quarter system, the UK semester or term system, or the system in use in some parts of Europe, namely a number of 90-minute study periods. We have tried, with some difficulty, to accommodate each of these possibilities, and a unit, in our view, is equivalent to roughly 4–5 hours' full-time work, in class and/or out of it. Naturally, however, students and their tutors will want to tailor the work done within each unit to both the time available, the nature of the group and the focus of the course. Our preferred structure is a compromise, and like many compromises, it's intended to be taken with a certain amount of patience . . . and good humour.

Each unit includes exercises and further reading, together with some suggested web links. Some of the early units contain passages for translation. It's important to stress that the exercises are there in order to introduce you not only to 'the earliest English', but also to invite you to work in detail with some of the most important tools of the craft that is historical linguistics – such as OED2 (the 2nd edition of the great *Oxford English Dictionary*). (You'll find that 'Working with dictionaries' is the topic introduced in the Interlude between Units 4 and 5.) In order to fulfil this book's aims for yourself, it's necessary to work through each exercise before moving on to the next.

You're also encouraged, at the end of each chapter, to browse in some suggested websites. It must be admitted that websites can range from the egregious to the inspiring. What we've done here is simply pick out the ones that include the most useful material (such as maps of early England), or the most concise histories (such as the history of the Norman Conquest), or are best keyed in to the points we raise in the text. We don't, alas, receive any endorsements or fees from the websites we mention, and likewise their inclusion here doesn't necessarily imply any endorsement on our part. We have simply tried to be multiply functional, and maximally helpful.

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Unit One

Thinking about the earliest English

1.0 Preliminaries

This book is primarily about the earliest English language, the language used for 400 or so years before, and for some time after, AD 1066 in many parts of what is now England, southern Scotland and the Welsh borders. But the book has another purpose: if it's 'about' the earliest English language, it's also about the people who spoke it, and about the gradual, the rapid or even the catastrophic changes in that society – changes that came radically to affect the historical development of English.

To get an idea of what the earliest English sounded like, before you go any further, try browsing the websites listed at the end of this chapter. You'll hear Old English (OE) being spoken – that is, reconstructed. No one is completely sure how OE sounded, but scholars have a pretty good idea. (On how and why scholars have a good idea of how OE sounded, read further in Unit 1, and see also Units 2 and 5.) What you'll hear is a best guess about how OE was pronounced. You may be surprised that it doesn't sound like Chaucer (who was writing at the end of the 14th century), Shakespeare (who was writing around the end of the 16th) or the King James Version of the Bible (1611). Students frequently remark that OE sounds more like German than present-day English (PDE). A language spoken 1000 or more years ago may seem very distant. What could people living in the 21st century possibly have in common with what might seem, on a mere and ignorant acquaintance, to be what one of our more unenlightened students called 'the remote grunts of an unwashed peasantry'? Contrary to what we might expect, surviving manuscripts from the OE period do not reveal a linguistically primitive version of 'modern mankind'. Instead, a rather vivid picture emerges of a people in love with language; a people who prize not only a good story, but a story cleverly, beautifully and well told; a people who employ a vigorous language, often rich with stylistic density and metaphor. We'll see a complex, often aristocratic and highly organised society, with values, ideals and ideas about the world and life that can seem hauntingly contemporary. By the time you

finish this book, we think that you'll agree with us: neither the human spirit, nor the conditions with which it engages, have changed much, if at all, in the last 1500 years. Some of the best as well as the worst parts of our culture have a long history, and one that is often singularly expressed in the English language.

1.1 Uniformity and change

These remarks have an immediate linguistic point. What we do in these pages, as generations of scholars working in the fields of OE and, more recently, historical linguistics have done, is to reconstruct part of the history of a language. But we immediately wonder whether we are *re*constructing, or simply constructing? To talk about history at all, whether it's a linguistic history or the history of royal dynasties, is essentially to relate a narrative, to tell a story. Even though it might not be immediately apparent, if we think about it for a moment it becomes clear that all narratives have a theoretical framework – that is, a set of surrounding assumptions, that helps to make the story plausible. A story isn't a story, by our standards, unless it can be told within such a framework. One linguistic assumption of our theoretical framework, an assumption that is at least intuitively attractive, is that speakers of OE, and of early Middle English (eME), had the same vocal equipment as ours, and used it in very much the same ways. For example, just as there is a constraint in present day English to the effect that (crudely) 'no syllable may end in the sound segments */-pdf/' (there are no English words such as **mupdf* or **ipdf*), then we might expect, on quite general articulatory grounds, that no syllables ended that way in OE or eME either. The combination of speech sounds */pdf/ is of course 'difficult to say', but it also, more importantly, violates the enduring principles that determine what speech sounds may precede or follow one another to make up a well-formed English syllable. One issue we will track in these pages is this: *what is, linguistically, impossible today was probably impossible in earlier periods of the language*. There are, as always, exceptions to this. OE *cniht*, boy, was pronounced with syllable-initial /kn-/, that is, both the /k/ (corresponding to written <c>) and the /n/ were pronounced; OE *hring*, ring, was pronounced with initial /h/ followed by an /r/. These syllable-initial combinations of speech sounds are impossible in present day English, but were certainly possible in OE, just as they are today – and this is a key point – in *other* European languages. Nevertheless, despite these and other apparent exceptions, we'll continue to believe, at least generally, that *what's linguistically impossible today* ***was probably*** *impossible yesterday*. Put differently, what currently obtains in a language in terms of possible word orders, sounds, sound systems and so forth was possible, even probable, in the language long ago. Though it may be a depressing truth for those who

believe in the evolutionary betterment of the human condition, language users don't change much.

This principle is in fact so important that the historical linguist Roger Lass devotes a great deal of Chapter 1 of his book *Historical linguistics and language change* to it (Lass 1992:4–43, see especially Section 1.5). There, Lass calls it the *General Uniformity Principle*: 'No linguistic state of affairs (structure, inventory, process, etc.) can have been the case only in the past' (1992:28). This is linked with a weaker principle, which Lass dubs the *Uniform Probabilities Principle*: 'The . . . likelihood of any linguistic state of affairs (structure, inventory, process, etc.) has always been roughly the same as it is now.'

To illustrate the first principle, the General Uniformity Principle, consider the OE word *heofon*. You might make a reasonable, and correct, assumption that this word can be translated as 'heaven'. But notice that the OE form is spelled with <f>. Why isn't it spelled with <v>? The answer is two-fold. First, we have evidence that Anglo-Saxon scribes (on the distinction between 'Old English' and 'Anglo-Saxon', see below) didn't have access to the letter shape <v>. They used the written symbol <f> to do duty both for the speech-sound /f/ (as in *fisc*, fish or *faran*, to travel, cf. PDE to *fare*) and the speech-sound /v/ (as in *heofon* or *lufian*, to love). For reasons that needn't concern us at the moment, it appears that the letter written as <f> in OE was pronounced in two different ways. It was pronounced /f/ when it was initial or final in the word and as /v/ when it occurred between voiced sounds. ('Voicing' is explained in the following paragraphs.) These two voiced sounds were frequently vowel shapes. Vowels are always – under normal circumstances, excluding whispering – voiced in English, so if the sound was written as an <f>, it was pronounced as a /v/ when it occurred between two vowels and as an /f/ elsewhere.

This notion isn't quite as arbitrary as it might seem. As it turns out, the two sounds /f/ and /v/ are almost identical. They're pronounced in exactly the same way, using exactly the same articulatory organs (most clearly, the lips and teeth), in exactly the same place. There's only one clear difference. In production of ('realisation of') the sound /f/, the vocal cords don't vibrate; in the realisation of /v/, they do. To feel this for yourself, *whisper* the first sound in the word *fat*, and then the first sound in the word *vat*. Do this very slowly. You'll see – feel – that they sound exactly the same. Do it again and pay close attention to where your teeth are with respect to your lips during both sounds. They should be in exactly the same place. Now notice how much air comes out when you pronounce both sounds. Again it should be the same. That's because the speech sounds /f/ and /v/ are very similar except for the feature of production that linguists call *voicing*.

To illustrate that point more precisely, put your fingers gently on the side of your throat next to your Adam's apple. This time *say* (i.e. don't whisper) the first sounds in both of those words (*fat* and *vat*). You should feel a

vibration (and hear a buzzing sound) on the first sound of the second word, *vat*. In other words, one sound is voiced, or produced with vibration of the vocal cords, and the other sound is voiceless, that is, produced without vibration of the vocal cords. Put differently, and slightly more technically, we might say that '/v/ is the voiced counterpart of /f/'.

Thinking about matters this way leads us to a basic theoretical concept in linguistics. Languages might have one *underlying* speech-sound that is realised differently (in this case, as either voiced or voiceless) depending on where the sound appears in the word. In the case of OE, we might want to think about the claim that there was one *underlying* speech-sound, /f/, which speakers and writers thought of, and wrote, as <f>, and which could be realised in speaking *either* as [f] (a voiceless sound) *or* as [v] (a voiced sound), depending on the context in which it appeared. In fact, in OE it seems to have been pronounced [f] everywhere *except* when it occurred between two vowels, or any two other voiced sounds. In other words, /f/ – we might argue – *became* voiced most characteristically when it occurred between voiced sounds.

Exercise 1.1.0

At this point we'd like to invite you to discover some evidence for Lass's General Uniformity Principle. Remember, this is the hypothesis that we should be able to find evidence in the present for what we are claiming existed long ago. If we apply this to our study of the history of the earliest English, we might say that if a sound, written as <f>, was voiced or voiceless depending on its location in a word in OE, there should be some evidence of this phenomenon in present-day English (PDE – we'll use this abbreviation from here on). Luckily we won't have to look at any languages other than PDE for evidence, because there are some word pairs in PDE in which this still happens.

There was an ending in OE that changed certain nouns into the infinitive form of a verb. That ending was <-*ian*>, and it had the effect of putting the final sound of a noun's root (for now, 'root' = most basic form of the word, the 'citation form') between two vowels. In OE, for instance, the word for the noun 'cloth' was *clāð* (where the symbol <ð> is pronounced like voiceless 'th', as in PDE *clo**th***), and the verb 'to clothe' was formed by adding '-ian' to give us *clāðian*, to clothe.

> How do you think the 'th' sound in the second word was pronounced in OE?
> And why might it have been pronounced in this way?

We hope you answered 'like the th-sound in *clo**th**e*' – because the sound written as 'th' came between two vowels in OE (the vowel shapes written <ā> and <i>) and therefore became voiced. So one survivor of the OE system is the word pair *cloth* (noun) and *to clothe* (the verb form) in which

the noun form ends in a voiceless 'th' but the verb form ends in a voiced 'th'. There are other word pairs that came either directly or indirectly from this OE principle, where a sound is very often voiced between two voiced sounds, and voiceless everywhere else.

Exercise 1.1.1

Look at the pairs of PDE words shown in table 1.1 and put a tick (AmE check) by those that seem to have this voiceless/voiced alternation; that is, pairs in which the voiceless sound suggested by <th> (as in ***th****igh*) becomes the voiced (still suggested by the <th> spelling, as in ***th****y* or ***th****en*), or where the sound /f/ becomes /v/. Don't look at the comments until you have finished the exercise.

Table 1.1 Alternating noun/verb pairs in PDE

Nouns	Verbs	Singular	Plural
teeth	teethe	life	lives
breath	breathe	sheaf	sheaves
house	house	loaf	loaves
advice	advise	oath	oaths
bath	bathe	wife	wives
		half	halves
		laugh	laughs

Comment on Exercise 1.1.1

The words we were looking for among the noun/verb sets were *teeth*, *breath*, *bath*. In each of these cases, when the word becomes a verb, the voiceless, final sound of the noun becomes voiced. In PDE we can turn nouns into verbs via the process of incorporation, where nouns are simply used as verbs. For example:

(1) Mary put butter on her biscuit.
(2) Mary buttered her biscuit.
(3) The twins took a photograph of their mother.
(4) The twins photographed their mother.

In PDE we also use derivational affixes such as *-ise* (spelled <-ize> in AmE) to turn a noun into a verb.

(5) We cooked the onions in butter until the sugar began to turn to caramel.
(6) We caramelised the onions.

In the second group of words found in the above exercise (right-hand columns), the singular and plural nouns, the words we were looking for

were *life*, *sheaf*, *loaf*, *wife* and *half*. Nowadays it may seem peculiar that the plural of 'wife' isn't 'wifes' – after all, most words form the plural with an 's' or 'es', but don't change root-final consonants from a voiceless to a voiced version as they do so. The reason that the plural form of 'wife' has a 'v' sound, of course, is because of the history of the word, namely that OE principle regarding /f/ and /v/. That these alternations still exist in PDE is evidence of Lass's uniformity principles. These words are like linguistic fossils – forms that are relics of an earlier existence.

Later, we'll say more about the principles we've just sketched. For the moment, both principles can be roughly summarised under one heading as the *Uniformitarian Hypothesis*, which will function as part of the theoretical framework we're going to need in order to tell the story of – that is, (re)construct – the earliest English, and act as a check on the wilder excesses of historical speculation.

1.2 Initial terminology

We've already said that this text is primarily intended to help you read, study and enjoy the earliest English language and aspects of its culture, especially its literary culture. We're assuming that you don't have much, if any, prior knowledge of the subject, although, as we'll soon see, whether English is your first or second language, you already possess a great deal of tacit knowledge of the earliest English (and even certain aspects of its historical culture). Just as human beings are inseparable from their personal histories – our individual pasts are part of our identities at this moment, today – it's impossible for languages and cultures to leave their pasts behind.

For the moment, let's think about the earliest English by adopting a straightforward distinction between the terms *Anglo-Saxon* and *Old English*. Some scholars use the terms interchangeably, but we won't. In this book we'll use the term *Old English* to mean one or other of the varieties of the language widely spoken in England in the six centuries between the approximate dates of 449 and 1150. We'll use the term *Anglo-Saxon* to refer to everything else, such as the people(s), culture and archaeology. We might speak, for example, of 'an Anglo-Saxon brooch' or 'an Anglo-Saxon king'. We won't speak of an 'Old English king' – the phrase is in any case ambiguous – but we will talk about entities such as the 'Old English vocabulary' and 'Anglo-Saxon kings'.

We'll also use some abbreviations (initial lists, of both abbreviations for languages and for some grammatical terms, are given at the beginning of the book). OE, as you'll have already noticed, will stand for Old English, the language spoken across most areas of what's now, geographically, England from the 5th to the 12th centuries. *Beowulf*, one of the most famous

epic poems in what can be called English, is an example of OE, as is Cædmon's *Hymn*, which was composed in the late 7th century (a West Saxon version of this text can be found later in this unit). ME will stand for Middle English, the version of English spoken in roughly the same area from around 1100 to about 1500. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is written in a London dialect of what we're calling Middle English. Early Modern English (eModE) will cover roughly 1500 to c.1800, and includes the language of Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton and the King James Bible.

Now, you'll find abbreviations such as OE, eME, eModE and PDE in many standard handbooks. It's convenient to divide the history of the English language up in such a way but, of course, such divisions are a gross simplification and involve much fudging. This fudging is often concealed in terms such as 'roughly 1500 to c.1800'. In fact, there is both a range and a variety of 'Englishes'. Think about the differences between British, American, Canadian and Australian English, or the English spoken in Texas as compared to the English spoken in Liverpool. The Englishes spoken in the Philippines, Nigeria and India are also instances of 'English', but may be somewhat different from the variety of English with which you are familiar. Sometimes you can understand another variety of English easily, sometimes not. In other words, 'English' is a convenient but inaccurate and vague notion. Which English are we talking about? In this book, we're largely going to ignore this complex issue and will usually write as if there were one English language. But of course that isn't true, except for the purposes of analytical convenience. We'll hint at the complex nature of the true state of affairs when we begin to study the linguistic foundations of what were to become the dialects that made up the earliest English.

We're going to ignore something else. Linguists tell us that all languages change over time. This is a completely natural, unstoppable process. Most linguists will argue that languages don't decay, become degraded or, conversely, become less primitive and somehow 'improve'. They just change. Common sense will tell you that these changes won't be abrupt, but will be gradual and almost imperceptible to the users of the language.

These worries and simplifications notwithstanding, we'll speak of OE as 'lasting' up to c.1150, and ME 'starting' in c.1150. In fact, of course, English didn't change on one particular date. It would be a great falsification to say that English changed on 1 January 1150, or on the day that the first Viking long-ships were sighted off Lindisfarne (late 8th century), or on the day after the Battle of Hastings (see Unit 8). Vikings and Normans had a very significant impact on the language, true, but their full linguistic importance is revealed later, often very much later, than the signal events of their first arrivals. The language changed slowly, over time, in different ways and at varying rates in different varieties, though, nevertheless, the general direction of these linguistic changes seems fairly clear. The dates we have decided

to use in this book are for convenience, imposed by linguists to facilitate, organise and manage a discussion and study of the changes in English. The dates aren't, and can't be, linguistic turning-points. They are wholly arbitrary and exist for the purposes of story-telling. We're going to use them anyway.

Exercise 1.2.0

For most in-text exercises in this book we're going to provide 'comments' after we've set the exercises themselves. For the following exercise, however, we're not going to do so. The exercise below simply asks you to become more aware of your own, and others', dialect(s) of English. It asks you to begin to think about your own, possibly tacit, knowledge of the history of the English language.

1. One reason we are making a distinction between OE and Anglo-Saxon is because of the ambiguity in a sentence like 'He was an old English king'. If that sentence were spoken, what might the ambiguity be?
2. You may not have lived sufficiently long to notice changes in English (and change in one's own lifetime, however long, can be hard to identify precisely), but if you know The Lord's Prayer, or any other passages from the King James version of the Bible, or passages from Shakespeare, recite them to yourself, or to the other members of your group, to give a sense of how English has changed. Can you think of any other *evidence* that English has changed over time?
3. Our students have told us that they think one way to keep everything straight is to start a time-line early and add to it as you go along. Take out a piece of notebook paper, turn it sideways and sketch in the times and events (or general periods) that we've mentioned already. For example, When was the Old English period? Middle English? When did the Vikings come to England? If necessary, look up what you think are key dates in an encyclopedia or history textbook. As you progress through this book, you'll probably have to tape additions to your piece of notebook paper.

1.3 Old English poetry

We're now going to turn our attention to OE poetry, and to Cædmon's famous *Hymn* as a case in point. This last was composed in the second half of the 7th century in Whitby, in what is now North Yorkshire (part of the OE kingdom of Northumbria). The *Hymn*, famous since it's the first extant (written, surviving) poem on a religious subject in the English language, was clearly held to be important by Cædmon's contemporaries. During the

decades after its composition, at least four copies of the poem were made. Since most OE poems survive in just one copy (although of course other copies may have been lost), the copying of the *Hymn* indicates its literary and cultural value.

Although the *Hymn* is one of the first extant and datable poems in English, that's not of course to suggest in any way that it's the first poem ever to have been composed and recited. There was a very long and rich tradition of poetry before Cædmon recited a line. This can be inferred from the existence of scraps of language, such as charms, riddles and inscriptions, found in similar forms all over northern Europe, and also from references within surviving OE poetry.

The earliest, pre-Cædmon poetry was composed and recited by peoples whose culture was sometimes if not largely, pagan. One important point to notice was that poetry, at this early date, seems to have had one very characteristic form: it was composed in a line which had a two-part structure. The two parts of the line were linked by alliteration (we'll look at this in more detail in Unit 5). In Anglo-Saxon England, at least, poetry had this one form: it had no other. The uniqueness of this situation is expressed by Strang (1970:323):

> There are several reasons in the nature of OE verse why it should, to a greater extent than later poetry, develop a language distinct from that of prose. The most radical is not often mentioned, and is difficult for readers accustomed to later literature to grasp. It is that OE had a straightforward distinction between metre, which had a single, unique form, and non-metrical writing, i.e. writing not in this form. This is indeed a situation rare in any literature; normally, if one decides to write in verse, one can also decide which verse-form to write in. In ME, though forms derived from OE metre survived, the essential of the situation was changed, for the poet always had a choice of metres open to him. His verse might be alliterative or rhyming; the lines might contain any number of feet, of various types, uniform or in mixed patterns; they might be arranged in stanzas of various types, or not in stanzas at all. Before 1100 these alternatives did not exist as choices. There was one metre; you used it or you did not. You might compromise and conform to some but not all of its rules, writing a kind of semi-verse, and you could add patterning of your own selection to the basic form; but you could not write a verse of a different form.

Since OE poetry appears to have been associated with one, and only one, particular form, that form functioned as a *cultural sign* ('this form of discourse = poetry'). In addition, this form seemed to be somehow ideally suited to the language in which it was composed. (We explore this issue more fully in Unit 5.)

These factors bear on the fame of Cædmon's *Hymn*, and help to explain its contemporary importance. There are other factors we might want to begin to consider: even though pre-Cædmonian poetry embodied non-Christian subject-matter, and though the earliest praise-poems were reserved

for secular rulers, Cædmon apparently composed a short poem in praise of a specifically Christian God. This in itself was unusual. But even more unusual was the fact that this praise-poem was composed in the very form, and using the same verbal strategies and forms of diction, as had been earlier employed in Germanic, that is, pagan verse. More unusual still, Cædmon was by no means the scop (*scop*, shaper, poet) of a tribe or court, one versed in the techniques of Germanic poetry (and paid to reproduce them), but an illiterate animal husbandman.

The story of Cædmon is found in Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, or *Ecclesiastical History* (completed around 731). Bede wrote his *History* in Latin, but Cædmon's *Hymn* is given in an English version in his original manuscript. As well as the versions that exist in different manuscripts of the 8th century, the text was several times reproduced, in different varieties of OE, during the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries.

1.4 Reading passage

The only details of Cædmon's life are known from Bede, who related that Cædmon was a member of the secular community of the monastery whose abbess was called Hild (abbess 657–680), at Whitby. He was a man, recounted Bede, well advanced in years, and he had never learnt any of the arts of poetry-making and song-craft. On one occasion (Bede's narrative continues) Cædmon was attending a *gebēorscipe* (beer-party). A harp was passed around and each of those present was expected to recite something to the accompaniment of the harp. Cædmon, in the full knowledge of his own poetic incompetence (or perhaps because of the lewd subject-matter of the songs being recited) left the party and went out to sleep with the animals whose care was entrusted to him that night. During his sleep, a figure, perhaps an angel, appeared to him and commanded him to sing something. 'I don't know how to sing anything,' replies Cædmon ('Ne con ic nōht singan'), 'and that was why I left the party and came here.' The figure isn't about to be appeased by Cædmon's embarrassment. 'Yet you shall be able to sing to me.' Cædmon is half-persuaded. 'What must I sing?' The figure replies, 'Sing to me of the beginning of creation.' At that point, and divinely inspired, Cædmon recites his *Hymn*.

Since we'll be looking later at several specimens of OE written in West Saxon dialect, the text is given here not in the original Northumbrian, but in a West Saxon version. (Should you want to compare the West Saxon version with the original Northumbrian, turn to page 205.) Editorial punctuation, capital letters and length-marks (over relevant vowels) have been supplied. Notice that each line of the poem has been split into two halves. That division reflects a structural principle of the verse: as we'll see in Unit 5, each half-line is a self-contained metrical entity.

Cædmon's *Hymn* (WS version)

First half-line	**Second half-line**	
Nū sculon herigean	heofonrīces Weard,	**Line 1**
Meotodes meahte	ond his mōdgeþanc,	**Line 2**
weorc Wuldorfæder,	swā hē wundra gehwæs,	**Line 3**
ēce Drihten,	ōr onstealde	**Line 4, etc.**
Hē ærest scēop	eorðan bearnum	
heofon tō hrōfe,	hālig Scyppend.	
Þā middangeard	monncynnes Weard,	
ēce Drihten,	æfter tēode	
fīrum foldan,	Frea ælmihtig.	

Word for word translation

Now (we) must praise	Heaven-kingdom's Guardian
(the) Maker's powers	and his mind-thought,
works of the glory-father	as he (the) wonders of each
eternal Lord	installed (the) beginning.
He first shaped	of earth for the children
heaven as a roof,	holy Maker.
Then middle-yard	mankind's Guardian,
eternal Lord,	afterwards created
for men of earth,	Lord Almighty.

Prose translation

Now we must praise the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom, the powers of the Creator and his conception, the works of the Father of glory, since he, the eternal Lord, established the beginning of every wonder. The Holy Creator first shaped heaven as a roof for the children of men. Then afterwards the Guardian of mankind, eternal Lord, and God Almighty, made this world for the people of earth.

Before we comment on the poem, complete the following exercise.

Exercise 1.4.0

Study the OE version of the text above and highlight the elements in each verse-line that alliterate. Though we comment on this in more detail shortly (and look at it in far more detail in Unit 5), for the moment we define alliteration as involving the initial consonant(s) of words that begin with the same sound, such as PDE ***s**in*, ***s**uffering* and ***sc**ent*. (Notice that in *scent*, the two letters shapes <sc> are realised as one speech-sound, /s/.) Don't look at the comments until you've tried to pick out the alliterating sounds.

Comment on Exercise 1.4.0

Your answer probably looks something like this, where we've supplied some of the alliteration in boldface type:

Nū sculon **h**erigean	**h**eofonrīces Weard,	(alliteration on /h/)
Meotodes **m**eahte	ond his **m**ōdgeþanc,	(alliteration on /m/)
weorc **W**uldorfæder,	swā hē **w**undra gehwæs,	(alliteration on /w/)
ēce Drihten,	ōr onstealde.	(alliteration?)
Hē ǣrest scēop	eorðan bearnum	(alliteration?)
heofon tō **h**rōfe,	**h**ālig Scyppend.	(alliteration on /h/)
Þā **m**iddangeard	**m**onncynnes Weard,	(alliteration on /m/)
ēce Drihten,	æfter tēode	(alliteration?)
fīrum **f**oldan,	**F**rea ælmihtig.	(alliteration on /f/)

There doesn't, on the face of it, seem to be much system here. Some half-lines have one alliterating element, others have two. And in some lines alliteration seems to be absent altogether.

Yet with a slightly deeper understanding of the conventions that governed this metre, a system does emerge. There are three key points to notice, though we'll have cause to modify these points, particularly the point about apparent vowel alliteration, as we proceed:

- alliteration is a property of stressed syllables
- where they occur at the beginning of a stressed syllable, any vowel seems to alliterate with any other vowel (thus the vowel shapes written <ē> and <ō> in line four)
- the second half-line may only contain one alliterating syllable

'Alliteration is a property of stressed syllables.' It's difficult at this stage in our work to formulate this with any more precision, but perhaps we could say that, where a syllable is stressed, alliteration is a property of one or more sound segments initial in that syllable. And, apparently, any vowel, whatever its phonetic quality, can be allowed to alliterate with any other vowel. Take line 4, *ēce Drihten ōr onstealde*. Here it looks as if the line is alliterating on the *ē* of *ēce* and the stressed monosyllable *ōr*. (You might guess that the *on-* of *onstealde* might figure here, but it doesn't. Can you work out why not?) Something similar applies to line 5, *ǣrest scēop eorðan bearnum*, where the sound represented by the written shape <*æ*> seems to be alliterating with the sound represented by written <*eo*>. And again, in line 8, *ēce Drihten æfter tēode*, where *ē* seems to be alliterating with *æ*.

There's much more to say about OE metre, but we've said enough here to hint at the richness, density and compression of this form of composition. Part of Cædmon's 'miracle' is that an unlettered stockman could be divinely inspired not simply to sing of the Creation, but to do so using all the conventions, constraints and apparatus embodied in the verse of the Germanic heroic – and pagan – past. As with all poetry, in any language,

it's not just 'the thing said' that matters; it's *how* the thing is said. The form of a poem is part of its meaning.

Turning to the theme of the *Hymn*, the poem is in the tradition of the eulogy, or praise-poem. This form was familiar from the Germanic past, where secular kings were lauded for their power, their purpose, their generosity and the breadth of their conception. Here, the conception involves not just the military success of a tribe, but the creation of all things. Notice too the local details: God first shaped heaven 'as a roof'; then he turned his attention to *middangeard*, literally to the 'middle-yard', where earth is conceived as being poised between heaven and whatever lies below; and then to the inhabitants of *middangeard*, *moncynn*, mankind. The movement is from heavenly conception to the everyday textures of the human. It's a sophisticated achievement in so small a space.

Of Cædmon's later career, Bede's translator tells us that Cædmon woke from his dream, 'and all that he had sung while sleeping he remembered, immediately adding many words in praise of God in the same manner'. On waking, Cædmon visited his overseer, who immediately took him to the abbess, Hild, who told him, in the presence of learned men and scholars, to repeat the *Hymn* and reveal the source of his inspiration. They gave Cædmon further religious material and asked him if he could turn it into 'the best poetry'. He did so the following morning. 'All those things he was able to learn by ear he remembered,' wrote Bede, remarking that Cædmon was in the habit of musing on them 'like a clean beast chewing the cud' while turning them 'into the sweetest poetry. . . . His songs and poems were so lovely to hear that teachers themselves learnt from his dictation, and wrote down his words.'

1.5 Words, words, words

Although languages change over time, and sometimes they change radically, it's also true to say that the history of any language involves continuity as well. One area of the English language where continuity is particularly evident is in its vocabulary. The term *vocabulary* is used more or less synonymously with the term *lexicon*. The lexicon of a language includes all the words used in that language, from nouns (*book*, *window*, *eye*) and verbs (*to go*, *to read*, *to learn*, *to teach*) to prepositions (*by*, *with*, *from*, *in*) to pronouns (*he*, *she*, *it*, *they*, *them*) and determiners (words which typically introduce, and often specify, a following noun – examples are *a*, *an*, *the*, *this*). (Note: the italicised examples are merely a selection taken from PDE. Technically, a lexicon contains other elements, but they won't concern us for the moment. We'll explain the terms *noun*, *verb* and so on later, and with more precision. Unit 3 focuses on the structure of OE nouns, Unit 4 on OE verbs.)

The lexicon (or total 'mental dictionary') of PDE includes many words that were used in OE. One rough-and-ready way of finding English words whose ancestry can be traced back into OE is to find PDE monosyllables, words containing one and only one syllable, particularly monosyllabic words which have 'dictionary meanings', that is, words that are easily defined or imagined, such as *knife*, *ear*, *arm* or *sword*, as opposed to words that are difficult to define or imagine, such as *the*, *a* or *of*. Words that belong to the first set are sometimes called *content words* (or 'lexical words', though here we prefer the former term since it's less ambiguous). Words that belong to the second set are sometimes called *function words* (or 'non-lexical words', or 'grammatical words'). Unlike content words, which have dictionary meanings (e.g. cat = adult feline quadruped), grammatical words are words to which it's difficult or even impossible to ascribe meanings, but they do have a clear grammatical function within the sentence.

Consider, for example, a word like *hound*. It can be glossed (that is, defined) as something like 'adult canine quadruped' (noun). Example: 'Jasper had an old hound that always howled at the moon.' The word could also be glossed as a verb, meaning 'to follow or chase; to pursue relentlessly'. Example: 'Chris was hounded by debt collectors.' If you know German, you'll also know that German has a similar word, *Hund*, denoting the same entity. You might make a plausible guess that the English word *hound* and the German word *Hund* have a common history, and you'd be right. (*Hound* and *Hund* are called cognate words, where *cognate* is descended from Latin *co-natus*, born together.) In fact, OE and Old German (usually called Old High German, OHG, in reference works) have a common ancestor and, in some ways, Old English is more like present-day German than PDE. That's one of the reasons why studying OE seems, paradoxically perhaps, sometimes easier for native speakers of German than for native speakers of English.

Exercise 1.5.0

Given the explanation of *content words* and *function words* above, which of the following items do you think might be content words? On what grounds might you decide this? Once you have decided which items are content words and which are function words, look at the content words. What are the parts of speech that comprise this category?

Hints: You might have to use your intuitions to decide which words are nouns, which verbs and which adjectives. We urge you to think about the *linguistic behaviour* of the words to which you're applying those intuitions. For example, you might claim that *apple* is a noun. Why? It *behaves* like a noun: it can be preceded by an article (*an* or *the*); its sense can be modified by a preceding adjective ('the *bad* apple'); it takes a plural form in *-s* ('apples'), and so on. Verbs, too, show characteristic forms of linguistic behaviour: they have infinitive form in *'to X'* – *to*

eat, *to find*, *to swim* (but not, notice, **to apple* or **to quickly*); they take endings if they occur with a preceding third person singular pronoun (*he*, *she* or *it*) – *he swim**s**, she find**s**, and so on. And adjectives? Adjectives don't usually take endings (*the dry towel* is fine, but **the drys towels* is not); often, but not always, they stand in front of the head noun whose sense they are modifying; and so on. . . . Using your hunches is, then, a matter of careful observation of linguistic *behaviour*. That said, here's the list of words:

an	apple	for	cat	find
swim	eat	chair	sweet	top
quickly	go	coat	dry	fast
of	should	terrible	must	unusual
buy	this	why	slowly	seldom
since	early	beautiful	frequently	suddenly

Exercise 1.5.1

For this you'll need a good dictionary. A *Shorter Oxford* or *Concise Oxford* dictionary would be suitable, as would the *Encarta World English Dictionary* or *The American Heritage Dictionary*, College Edition. What you need is a dictionary that indicates word etymologies (or origins). The *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, for example – a text that just happens to be on the desk in Amsterdam at the moment these words are written – uses the abbreviation E to indicate words which are native English (that is, were used in, and survive from, the OE period, or even earlier), but that's not really adequate for the purpose of this exercise. Other dictionaries, and usually more detailed and extensive ones – such as the *New Oxford* that has just been pulled from the bookshelf – will use the abbreviation OE to refer to native words. The *Encarta World Dictionary* and *The American Heritage Dictionary* also use the abbreviation OE, and will usually give the OE word from which the PDE word came.

Once you have access to a good dictionary, turn up the entries for the letter <W>. In the exercise, you should find at least ten *monosyllabic* words beginning with the letter <W> which can be traced back to OE (reminder: the brackets < > indicate the written letter, not its sound). Copy down the words that come from OE and, if your dictionary has the OE word, write that down as well. Don't look at the comments in the following section until you've finished this exercise.

Comment on Exercise 1.5.1

We've no way of knowing which dictionary you've used, so our comments must be general, rather than tied to a particular page of your dictionary. But, as a specimen comment, consider the following, where the dictionary text used was *The Oxford Library of Words and Phrases, Vol. III: Word Origins*. The first word found there, *wabble*, isn't, of course, a monosyllable, so can be ignored. The next word, *Wacke*, is a rare word and used specifically in the

field of geology. There isn't anything in the entry that unambiguously indicates that the word comes from OE (there's no E or OE in the indication of origins). Looking down the list, the first monosyllable that has OE in the gloss is *wade* ('go OE'). The word *wade*, then, is our first entry. Moving on down the list, we find that the word *wag* (stir, move) was originally derived from OE *wagian*, totter, sway; the word *wake* (watching, watch, vigil) was originally OE (*wācan*, arise, come to life, be born); the word *walk* (move about, journey) came from the OE word *wealcan* meaning 'to roll, turn about, rove'; and *wall* (rampart, defensive structure) from OE *weall* . . . and so on. (As some of you may have noticed, OE *weall* has a deeper history and may ultimately be a borrowing from Latin *vallum*, rampart. The word is so thoroughly nativised, however, that we include it here, rather arbitrarily, as an OE word.)

In this exercise, you've probably come across dictionary abbreviations like AF, OHG, ON and so on. Like the abbreviation OE, these indicate the original language from which a word came. You'll find many of these abbreviations treated in the list of abbreviations at the front of this book, and you'll find a short account of the relationships between many European languages in Unit 2. For the moment, we want to emphasise that many PDE monosyllabic content words can trace their history back into the OE period. Of course, there are many monosyllables which can't and don't, but they're not altogether as numerous as those which can. On the other hand, many polysyllabic words, i.e. words containing more than one syllable, can be traced to borrowings from French, or from Latin, or any other number of languages, such as aboriginal Australian (*wallaby*) or even Hindi (*wallah*). English is, and always has been, a great borrower. In fact, this lexical fecundity is a distinctive feature of English, and the kinds of words borrowed, the dates at which they were borrowed and the languages from which they were borrowed are of considerable help in piecing together the story of English. Nevertheless, in spite of the numerous borrowings, it's quite possible to find a core OE vocabulary that has lasted to the present day. Once we're aware of this, then the fact that we can quickly find native words in the dictionary, and can see that they form a core vocabulary (consider how words such as *walk* or *wall* not only occur frequently but are of everyday currency), should help us to realise that even as speakers of PDE we're often using words of OE provenance. Even though it may sound and look very different today, OE is all around us. The English language has, over the centuries of its evolution, retained much of its original lexicon. It would be almost true to say that 'we speak Old English without knowing that we do': our linguistic present includes many aspects of the linguistic past.

Exercise 1.5.2

Study the following paragraph and, using your dictionary, find all the *monosyllabic* content words that can trace their origin back to OE. What general