**Early Medieval English Literature 650–1350**

**Prelims Paper 2**

**Michaelmas Term, 2025**

Prelims Paper 2 covers the first seven centuries of English literature, including the very earliest recorded English poetry. Most of your work for this paper will focus on Old English literature (written during the period 650–1100), but you will also have the opportunity to write essays about early Middle English literature (from the years 1100–1350).

You will work on this paper throughout your first year. You will have language classes and translation assignments to help you learn Old English, as well as tutorials for which you will write essays and commentaries about literature of the period. To begin with you will read texts in translation, but as the year progresses you will learn to work with medieval texts in their original language. By the end of the year you will be able to write a critical commentary demonstrating your ability to engage in detail with the language and form of Old English poetry, and essays that address wider thematic and contextual aspects of the literature.

There are four set texts, all poems, which we will study in particular detail: *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Wanderer*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and an extract from *Beowulf* (‘Beowulf’s Fight with Grendel’). The edition for these texts as set by the faculty is:

Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English: Eighth Edition* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

Your reading on language and grammar in Michaelmas will be from:

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

I recommend purchasing your own copies of these books. You may be able to find second-hand copies through Blackwells or other online sellers.

**Preparation**

While our classes will focus on the set texts, it is important that you also read widely in the literature of the period and familiarize yourself with the historical contexts from which it originates. To begin this work, you should read a modern English translation of *Beowulf* before you arrive in Oxford. There are many published translations available, though I particularly recommend:

*Beowulf: Second Edition (with facing page translation)*, ed. and trans. R. M. Liuzza (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2013).

This version includes useful contextual information in the Introduction and Appendices, and is translated in a manner that makes it easy to find your place in the original text (more poetic translations like Heaney’s are often meant to stand alone). If/when you have access to it through the Bodleian or any other library, I recommend Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2020) for further reading on *Beowulf*, but this is not required preparatory reading.

You may find it useful to do further background reading for this paper before you arrive, as the culture and history of the period will likely not be familiar to you. Higham and Ryanprovide detailed information about important historical and cultural background, and the *Cambridge Introduction* and *Cambridge Companion* offer broad introductions to the literature of the period:

Nicholas Higham and Michael Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013)

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

Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, second edition (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

**Other Resources**

If you just can’t wait for lectures to start, check out the ‘Early Medieval’ and ‘Medieval’ categories in the In Our Time archive:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2Dw1c7rxs6DmyK0pMRwpMq1/archive>

…and the ‘Medieval’ collection on Great Writers Inspire: <https://writersinspire.org/themes/medieval>

Looking forward to welcoming you to Wadham!