5AAEB004 Old English Poems and Modern British Poetry

LEVEL/SEMESTER TAUGHT: 2nd year module, band 1 medieval, taught semester 2
CONVENOR/TEACHER: TBC
TEACHING ARRANGEMENTS: One 2-hour seminar weekly
MODULE VALUE: 15 credits
ASSESSMENT: 1 translation and commentary of 1,500 words (25% of final mark), due mid-semester (1 March)
1 essay of 2,500 words (75% of final mark), details to be released by required deadlines on KEATS

PRE-REQUISITE REQUIREMENT: In order to take this module, you must have taken 5AAEB005, Cultural Encounters: Language and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England.

MODULE OUTLINE

Old English poems have been regularly translated or reworked into newer forms of English poetry and prose since at least the eighteenth century. This module offers a chance to explore some of this new Old English poetry. We will look at Modern British translations of Old English poems from the era of Ezra Pound to that of more recent poets of the twentieth and twenty-first century, including Edwin Morgan, Eavan Bolan, Fiona Sampson, Seamus Heaney, Chris McCully, Maureen Duffy, Simon Armitage and Bernard O'Donoghue. What does Old English poetry offer modern and contemporary poets? To answer this question we must first look at the literary and cultural meanings of the poet and the poetic voice in the early Middle Ages. This was a period of transition from oral modes of communication to written ones; from the voice as spoken to the voice as written. But modes of communication and questions of form are not simply historical issues relevant only to the early medieval period. Modern British poetry offers a similar opportunity to think about modes and forms of lyric expression in contemporary print, digital, visual and aural media.

The lyric voices expressed by short Old English poems can be understood in various ways: as embodied and gendered, as fragmented, partial and performed. These lyric poems travel along pathways of desire and difference, of religion and of sexuality, of subjectification and objectification, and of place and meaning. And they are quintessentially anonymous. How do modern British poets, English, Scottish, American and Irish, address the challenges of working with these Old English poems? In order to explore this question, we will concentrate on two genres: the shorter Old English lyrics, or so-called elegies, and the Old English riddles, both included in a single Anglo-Saxon manuscript, The Exeter Book, from the tenth century. We will start by translating into good modern English selected examples from these genres, but we will also explore how Modern British poetry encounters these old works and how we might think of this engagement critically.

Topics for discussion and analysis include: the relation between the voice and the poem; form and media; translation and poetry, authenticity and originality; the sounds of modern and old English poems; questions of place, manuscript and
You are encouraged to identify your own ‘new’ Old English poems and to produce your own translations for discussion as we work collectively through this material.


**Core Texts Studied**


Each week we will explore a critical topic or topics, and we will also translate the assigned poems and Modern British poetry as relevant. Please come to class having already prepared in draft your translation and ideas for discussion.

Weekly responsibility for leading discussion and translation will be assigned in the first class. Modern British poems will be supplied by handout and on KEATS where possible.

**KEATS:** Material will be updated and posted on KEATS on a regular basis: remember to check there before coming to class.

**Week 1 Voice, Subject, Body, Text**

What are the shorter Old English poems? How might we begin to read and understand these poems? This class introduces a few key critical concepts with which we can begin to explore the shorter Old English poems and that we will develop throughout the course.

**Translation** Old English Riddles (Marsden, Riddles 35b, swan; Riddle 35c, onion):


**Week 2 Seeing, Speaking, Hearing, Riddling**

How does a riddle speak? What is the relationship between seeing, hearing and riddling? Please prepare for this discussion by reading through the Old English Exeter Book Riddles in translation (the full collection is translated by Kevin Crossley
Holland (The Exeter Book Riddles) and also by Craig Williamson (A Feast of Creatures). Other anthologies include: S. A. J. Bradley (Anglo-Saxon Poetry), Kevin Crossley-Holland (The Anglo-Saxon World) and R. K. Gordon (Anglo-Saxon Poetry)

**Translation** Old English Riddles cont. (Marsden, Riddle 35 a, shield; Riddle 35 e, bookworm).

Modern British translations by Edwin Morgan, together with select examples from The Word Hoard.

**Week 3 Re-reading and Re-writing the Riddles**

This class explores the project of how we read and translate the Old English riddles. How do the riddles make us speak and in whose or which language? How do we translate and interpret them? Please prepare for discussion by selecting at least 2 riddles, other than those in Marsden, for discussion, together with at least 2 modern British examples from the genre of riddling (examples might include those from Maureen Duffy, Environmental Studies of 2013, as well as those by Crossley Holland and Chris McCully.

**Week 4 The Place of the Text: Manuscript to Edition**

In this class we will examine the place of the Old English Riddles and the shorter Old English poems, or elegies, in The Exeter Book manuscript and in various, postmedieval, edited forms. It will be important for you to look at editions other than those by Marsden for this discussion: examples would be other student-oriented texts, such as B. Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, ed. A Guide to Old English as well as scholarly editions, such as T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss, eds., The Wanderer. You can also explore how modern British poetry is presented, published, and explored, using the example of The Word Exchange as your example.

**Translation** The Wanderer (Marsden 38, lines 1-29)

**Week 5 Locating the Self: The Wanderer and the Old English Elegies.**

How does the group of poems known as the Old English Elegies create and make use of concepts of voice and subjectivity? Please read all the Old English elegies in translation in preparation for this class. Who speaks? Where? When? How?

**Translation** The Wanderer, lines 29-77


**Week 6 The Wanderer and The Seafarer**

The two poems of The Wanderer and The Seafarer are often put together in the critical literature. In what ways do these poems speak to one another? In what ways do they differ? What kinds of cultural knowledge do these poems expect of us? Which critical discussions have you found most useful or, indeed, least helpful? This class offers an opportunity to discuss in detail both poems, so prepare for discussion
by rereading the poems carefully, exploring and by exploring some of the critical literature about them.

**Translation** *The Wanderer*, lines 77-end


**Week 7 Gender and Genre**

In this class we will consider the relationship between gender and genre in the Old English elegies, concentrating on the (apparently) female-voiced lyrics of *The Wife’s Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, together with *The Husband’s Message*. How, if at all, does the gender of the speaking voice or voices of a poem impact on its genre?

**Translation** *The Wife’s Lament* (Marsden 40, lines 1-28)

Modern British translation by Eavan Bolan (*Word Exchange*, also included in *A Woman Without a Country*, 2014)

**Week 8 Women, Men and Other Things that speak**

Continuing the discussion of the preceding class, in this class we will engage more widely with issues of gender and voice, both in the Old English elegies but also bringing back into the discussion the Exeter Book riddles and their use of personification, voice and gender. In order to prepare for this class, therefore, consider again at least one female-voiced elegy, one male-voiced elegy and one riddle that makes use of voice and/or gender.


**Translation** *The Wife’s Lament*, lines 28-end.

**Week 9 Poem and place revisited.**

Central to critical discussion of the Old English elegies is the idea of exile, of being out of place, whether exile is chosen or imposed. These concepts, both scripturally and socially informed, are particularly relevant to *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* but they also inform, differently, *The Wife’s Lament, The Husband’s Message* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. Place and its relation to time are similarly important in two other poems, *Deor* and *The Ruin*. This class, therefore, is an opportunity to consider in detail the many different ways in which the idea of place and being out of place is important to our understanding of the Old English elegies, then, and now, in its contemporary Modern British iterations.

**Translation** *Deor*

Modern British translations of *Deor* by Simon Armitage, Maureen Duffy and Seamus Heaney
Week 10 Essay consultations

Supplementary Bibliography

In addition to the assigned reading above, the following works will be essential reading; others will be assigned as relevant: