Beginning Old English

HOW TO USE 'BEGINNING OLD ENGLISH'

The following pages provide a graded introduction to reading Old English. The sections should be tackled systematically, with plenty of repetition. Reading aloud is highly recommended. This part of the book is self-contained, with word-for-word translations (in section 2), vocabulary lists, notes and modern versions provided.

Grammar. A profound knowledge of grammar is not required to read Old English. Each group of practice sentences focuses on a specific aspect of the language and necessary information is given with the translations and in the supplementary essential grammar notes, and for those wanting more detail, reference is made also (by means of the paragraph mark §) to the Reference Grammar on pp. 409–50, where comprehensive tables of articles, nouns, verbs, etc, will be found.

Vocabulary. As well as being translated on the page, the words used in the practice sentences and practice texts are also integrated in the main Glossary at the back of the book (where they are identified by *B* followed by section and sentence (or line) number: e.g. *B*2a/7). Further examples of usage can be traced there.

Pronunciation. Help is given with the sounds of the Old English, especially in the early pages, by means of imitative pronunciation, using the modern language. This can only be approximate. It will be enough at first to learn the sounds of three unfamiliar letters, þ, ð and æ; to recognise that *c* and *g* marked with dots are 'soft' (*ċ* = 'ch' and *ġ* = 'y'), not 'hard' (as in 'cat' and 'god'); and to be careful with the 'long' vowels (marked with a small bar, the 'macron'), which are the only sounds that have changed their values radically since Anglo-Saxon times. Otherwise, words may be treated as in modern English. More specific information about the sounds of the language can be found in the section on 'The writing and pronunciation of Old English' on pp. 403–8.

1

1
Getting started

FAMILIARITY

When the hero of the poem *Beowulf* arrives in Denmark to tackle the man-monster Grendel, he introduces himself thus in Old English:

> Beowulf is min nama!

It is not hard to guess the meaning. We know the verb *is*, and the noun *nama* is almost the same as modern 'name'. As for *min*, we are very familiar with this possessive pronoun in the form 'mine', as in 'that book is mine', even if today we always use the shorter form 'my' *before* a noun, as in 'it's my book'. Evidently what Beowulf says is: 'Beowulf is my name!'

But what about the pronunciation in Anglo-Saxon times? We shall now repeat the line, using the helpful editorial conventions of today, which include putting a 'macron' (a short bar) over those vowels which we are confident will have been pronounced 'long':

> Bēowulf is mīn nama!

In *Bēowulf*, the long *ē* sounds much like modern English 'ay' in 'bay' and *ēo* is a double sound, something like 'bay-oh' said quickly; *wulf* sounds like modern 'wolf' – i.e. the 'short' *u* is the *u* of 'put', not 'pun'. *Is* is exactly as it is today. *Mīn*, however, needs careful attention, because it does not sound anything like modern 'mine' but like 'mean' (i.e. the vowel *ī* is 'ee'). That leaves *nama*, which is pronounced more or less as you might expect from the spelling, with the short vowels resembling those of 'mamma'.

CHANGES

The recognisable form of Beowulf's declaration of his name is evidence enough that modern English (ModE) has evolved directly from Old English (OE). But the 900-year period of development since Anglo-Saxon times has been long enough for changes to have occurred which may all too often disguise the connection.

Here is another half-line from *Beowulf*. It is used three times in the poem, first to describe the mythical founder of Denmark, then the Danish king Hrothgar, and then Beowulf himself:

> Þæt wæs gōd cyning.

2

This is again quite easy, though there are obvious snags for the modern reader. The first is orthographical. When writing OE, the Anglo-Saxons used several letters which we rarely see today, though they are not hard to master. (For more on the writing of OE, see pp. 403–4.)

þ   This is known as **thorn** (*þorn* in OE), which gives you its sound, 'th'. In ModE, 'th' varies a bit, though we hardly notice it: at the start of a word, and often in the middle, we tend to use what is known as a 'voiced' sound (where the vocal chords tighten and vibrate), as in '*th*e' and 'ra*th*er, but at the end of a word, and sometimes in the middle, the sound is usually 'unvoiced', as in 'ba*th*' and 'me*th*od'. More or less the same variation occurs in OE.

ð   This letter (a round-backed *d* with a stroke through) is *not* in the above extract but it should be noted now, for it is used just as often as thorn to represent the 'th' sound. It is known today as **eth**; the capital form is Ð. Thorn and eth were used at the whim of scribes and were interchangeable, and so you can expect to see *ðæt* as well as *þæt*. The pronunciation is the same.

æ   This letter, a combination of *a* and *e*, is known as **ash** (*æsc* in OE), and the name gives you the sound, i.e. it is the short 'a' in 'ash'. In fact OE *æsc* sounds just like ModE 'ash', for *sc* is nearly always 'sh' in OE. Æ is a single letter with a single sound. Do not be tempted to pronounce it as some sort of diphthong or double vowel. We shall also meet a long version of *æ*, as in the word *þ̄ær*, which probably sounded quite like its ModE equivalent 'there', except that the *r* should be sounded slightly.

The sounds of thorn (or eth) and ash are thus very easy to remember: OE *þæt* (or *ðæt*) sounds just like its modern equivalent 'that'.

As for the rest of our extract, OE *wæs* is of course ModE 'was', but be careful: it must have the same vowel-sound as *þæt*, and so it rhymes with ModE 'as'.

What about *gōd*? Here the vowel-length is crucial. If the word were *god* (no macron) it would sound like, and mean, ModE 'god'. But we have marked *o* with a macron, which means that the vowel is long, 'oh', and so in this case the word sounds like ModE 'goad'. Its meaning is 'good'.

To remember the important difference between *gōd* and *god*, it is worth learning how to say 'God is good' in OE. It is *God is gōd*, where *God* is exactly like ModE 'God' but *gōd*, as noted, sounds like 'goad'. In Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, the name of God is not usually given a capital initial letter, any more than the long vowels are marked with a macron, and so we have to guess the correct meaning – and thus pronunciation – whenever we come across *god*. In practice, the context usually makes this easy.

It will come as no surprise that *cyning* is 'king'. The reduced version *cyng* or *cing* is often used, too, and by 1100 it is not unusual to see the word written *kyng* or even *king*. You may guess from this that *i* and *y* are often interchangeable in OE; look out

4   *Beginning Old English*

for *ys* as well as *is*, for instance. You should try to prounounce the *y* in *cyng* with lips pushed forward, but it will not much matter if *cyng* sounds like 'king'.

The only other possible obstacle to understanding the sentence *Þæt wæs gōd cyning* is the tendency for OE not to use an indefinite article ('a/an'). Often the definite article ('the') is omitted, too, especially in poetry. Today's version of our OE sentence is: 'That was a good king'.

WORDS

Here are two more half-lines from *Beowulf*:

> Sweord wæs swātiġ.
> Þæt wæs wundor miċel.

The first is in the poet's description of the giant sword used by the hero to kill the avenging mother of Grendel. *Sweord* is obvious enough, though it should be noted that in OE the *w* in *sw* must always be pronounced; in 'sword' today (but not in other 'sw'-words) we drop the *w* and say 'sord'. The two elements of *eo* must be lightly pronounced (a weaker version of the *ēo* in *Bēowulf*), along with the *r*; so it's *swe-ord*, but with the two syllables merged.

The main vowel of *swātiġ* is a long *a*, i.e. 'ah'. We have marked the *g* with a dot and this shows that it is 'soft', i.e. not *g* as in 'get' but *y* as in 'yet'. (Usually in OE, *g* is 'soft' before or after the vowels *e* and *i*.) Thus for the whole word we have the sound 'swah-ty'. You may now guess the ModE descendant of the word: 'sweaty'. But would our poet really have told us that Beowulf's sword was 'sweaty'? Obviously not. We need to be alert to **semantic change** – that is, the fact that words often alter their precise meaning over time. In OE *swātiġ* did not refer primarily to the product of the sweat glands, but to blood. Beowulf's sword was not 'sweaty' but 'bloody'. And of course we need to supply 'the' at the start of the sentence, and so we get: 'The sword was bloody'.

In the second half-line, *Þæt wæs wundor miċel*, the first two words should now cause no problem, and *wundor* is what it looks like, ModE 'wonder', though we must take care with the pronunciation: remember that the sound of short *u* in OE is like that of the *u* in 'put'. It is also important to sound the final *r* in *wundor*.

In *miċel*, the *c* is marked with a dot and this means, as with *ġ* above, that it is 'soft', i.e. 'ch', not 'k': thus *miċel* sounds like 'mitch-ell'. Even though it comes after the noun, *miċel* is an adjective, describing the noun *wundor*. This word order is common in OE, unlike in ModE, where an adjective normally precedes its noun. What does *miċel* mean? If you are a Scot, you may have guessed it, because in Scottish English 'mickle' (or 'muckle') is still in use to mean 'big' or 'great'. Thus *Þæt wæs wundor miċel*, is literally 'that was wonder great', or, as we would say today (supplying an indefinite article), 'that was a great wonder'.

OLD AND NEW

We shall end this section with a line from another famous OE 'heroic' poem, *The Battle of Maldon*. It is the first of our examples to use a word (as part of a compound) which is no longer in use in any variety of the modern language – though it may be guessable in context. The spokesman for a ship-load of invading Vikings has demanded that the opposing English army capitulate, but the English are defiant, and their leader says:

Ġehȳrst þū, sǣ-lida, hwæt þis folc seġeð?

An odd feature of the first word of this sentence is the initial *ġe*. This *prefix* is extremely common in OE. Its pronunciation is a very light 'yeh', never stressed. The good news is that, in terms of function and meaning, it is virtually redundant. In fact, the best advice is always to *ignore* it; often a puzzling word will then become familiar. As a way of reminding you to disregard the *ġe* prefix, it will be italicised in this first part of the book (but not in the main texts in the second part).

With *ġe* dropped, the verb *hȳrst* may just be recognisable. It is part of *hȳran*, 'to hear', specifically the form used for the 'second-person singular' in the present tense – i.e. in 'antique' ModE, 'hearest'. The sound of OE *ȳ* is a long version of the *y* in *cyning* noted above – something like the long *ī* of *mīn*, i.e. 'ee', but said with the lips pushed forward as though you were about to whistle. Try to pronounce the *r* slightly as well. The result will in fact be quite like the sound of ModE 'hearest', but with the second *e* elided. (If you know some French or German, *ȳ* is like the *u* of *tu* or the *ü* of *müde*.)

As for *þū*, it is simply the OE ancestor of ModE 'thou', but note that it must be pronounced 'thoo'. So our line begins, 'Hearest thou?'

Sǣ-lida consists of two words, as our hyphen shows. The first is easy, 'sea', but pronounced with a long vowel which is a bit like the *a* of 'mad' (which tends to be quite long) or the sound of 'air' (but a single sound, with no hint of the final *r*). *Lida* (pronounced as written, with *i* as in 'lid') is one of many OE words for 'sailor'. It comes from a verb meaning 'to travel' which is historically related to ModE 'lithe'.

Thus the compound means 'sea-sailor', but as that sounds a bit tautological to us, we could say 'seafarer' or 'seaman' – or even 'Viking', because, as we have noted, it is indeed one of this special breed of seafarers who is being addressed in the poem.

That leaves *hwæt þis folc seġeð*, which is easy. All the words are close to their equivalents in ModE. The combination *hw* is like *wh* today, said with plenty of aspiration, so *hwæt* is ModE 'what', but note carefully that it rhymes with *þæt*, ModE 'that'. *Þis* sounds just like ModE 'this'. *Folc* gives ModE 'folk', but you must sound the *l*, and note that short *o* in OE is always like that in 'not'. Thus *folc* sounds like the

6   *Beginning Old English*

first element of 'Falklands'. *Seġeð* is also easy, when you remember that *ġ* is 'soft', like a 'y': the word sounds very like its ModE equivalent, 'sayeth'.

So we can render *Ġehȳrst þū, sǣ-lida, hwæt þis folc seġeð?* literally as 'Hearest thou, seafarer, what this folk sayeth?', or more idiomatically, 'Do you hear, seafarer, what this people says?'

You will now see how useful it is to have an acquaintance with early forms of the modern language when reading OE. Today we do not generally use 'thou' and 'thee' for the second-person singular pronouns but we take such features for granted when reading Shakespeare's plays. Furthermore, his characters may well say 'thou hearest' or 'he sayeth', as well as 'you hear' and 'he says'; and they may ask 'hearest thou?', although they are already using our modern idiom 'do you hear?' also. Many writers after Shakespeare, up until the early twentieth century, use 'antique' diction like this, of course, especially poets.

REMINDERS

1. Remember that *þ* and *ð* (both 'th') are interchangeable.
2. Use *þæt* / *ðæt* – pronounced as ModE 'that' – as a sound-model for *þ* / *ð* and *æ*, and use *Bēowulf* 'Beowulf' to remind you how to pronounce the short *u*, whether it be in *wulf* or *wundor* or any other word.
3. Learn to ignore the prefix *ġe* when trying to guess the meaning of a word.
4. Master the distinction between *o* and *ō* by memorising *God is gōd* (pron. 'god is goad'), 'God is good'.
5. Think 'antique' ModE when tackling pronouns and verb endings, as well as some aspects of word order.

TEST YOURSELF

These are the extracts from OE poems that we have studied in the first section. Read them through several more times until you can understand them without having to 'translate' them:

Bēowulf is mīn nama!

Þæt wæs gōd cyning.

Sweord wæs swātiġ.

Þæt wæs wundor miċel.

Ġehȳrst þū, sǣ-lida, hwæt þis folc seġeð?

2
Practice sentences

2a: Verbs

As in ModE (but more so), verbs in OE inflect (i.e. take various endings) or alter their basic form, according to tense and 'person' (see §G/overview). The basic form of a verb is called the *infinitive*, from which other forms of the verb derive. In ModE we express this with 'to', as in 'to come'. In OE, infinitives nearly always end in *-an* or *-ian*, and 'to' is not normally used. The infinitives of the OE verbs used here are given in the select vocabulary below.

1. Se cyng **cōm** mid his scipe.
   The king came with his ship

   se ='seh'; *cōm* ='comb'; *scipe* ='ship-eh'

2. Iċ **cume** tō þē and **bletsiġe** þē.
   I come to thee and bless thee

   iċ ='itch'; *cum-e*: *u* as in 'put', *-e* ='eh'; *tō þē* ='toe they'; *bletsiġe* ='blet-see-yeh'

3. Hē **bletsode** ðā his suna.
   He blessed then his son

   hē ='hay'; *-sode* ='so-deh'; *ðā* ='thah'; *suna*: *u* as in 'put'

4. 'Iċ **lufiġe** God ælmihtiġne', **cwæð** hē.
   I love God almighty quoth he

   ælmihtiġne ='al-miht-ee-neh' (*h* rasped); *cwæð* ='cwath'

5. Þā **āhsode** hē hine, 'Hwæt **is** þīn nama'?
   Then asked he him What is thy name

   āh- ='ah'; *hine* ='hin-eh'; *hwæt*: *-æt* = 'at'; *þīn* ='theen'

6. Māria **cōm** on morgen ær hit lēoht **wæs**.
   Mary came in morning ere it light was

   Māria ='mah-ria'; *ær* ='air'; *lēoht*: 'lay-oh-t'

7. Sēoc hē **biþ** þe tō seldan **eteð**.
   Sick he is who too seldom eateth

   sēoc ='say-oc'; *þe* ='theh'

SELECT VOCABULARY

āhsode < āscian *to ask*

bletsiġe, bletsode < bletsian *to bless*

biþ < bēon-wesan *to be* [see essential grammar, p. 9]

cōm, cume < cuman *to come*

cwæð < cweþan *to speak, say*

eteð < etan *to eat*

is < bēon-wesan *to be*

lufiġe < lufian *to love*

wæs < bēon-wesan *to be*

8   *Beginning Old English*

TRANSLATIONS AND NOTES

1. The king came with his ship.

   Se (a short 'seh') is 'the' before a masculine noun. You can pron. *cyng* as 'king', but see p. 4. *Cuman*, like ModE 'come', makes its preterite (past tense) by changing its stem form: *cōm*, 'came'. *Irregular* verbs like this are called 'strong', as explained below. ModE no longer has the preposition *mid*, 'with'.

2. I come to you and bless you.

   Note that *iċ cume* could be 'I come', 'I am coming' or 'I will come'. Context will tell you which is suitable. *Bletsiġe* is the present tense of *bletsian*.

3. Then he blessed his son.

   Bletsian is a verb that makes its preterite 'regularly' by adding *-ode* in the sing. *Regular* verbs are called 'weak', as explained below.

4. 'I love God almighty', he said.

   Lufian behaves just like *bletsian*. In *ælmihtiġne*, *æ* is as in 'ash', *i* as in 'bit'; the *h* should be lightly rasped, a bit like 'ch' in ModE 'loch'. *NOTE*: We shall represent this sound in the pronunciation hints by *ḥ*. *Cwæð*, the preterite of *cweþan*, is much used in OE.

5. Then they asked him, 'What is your name?'

   The preterite plur. ending for regular verbs of the *bletsian*/*lufian* type is *-odon*. Note that the sound of *hine* is 'hin-eh' – it does *not* rhyme with 'nine'!

6. Mary came in the morning before it was light.

   Stress the first syllable of *Māria*. *Morgen* may be pron. as if it were ModE (but for the *g*, see p. 405). OE often uses *on* where ModE would have 'in'.

7. He who eats too seldom will be ill.

   Biþ is a present-tense form of 'to be' much used when the sense is future or proverbial; see below. NOTE: The relative particle *þe* (a sort of pronoun) is very common and is rendered 'who' or 'which' or 'that', as appropriate.

ESSENTIAL GRAMMAR

'Strong' and 'weak' verbs

OE is just like ModE in having two major sorts of verb: those which make their preterite (i.e. past tense) regularly by adding an inflection (ModE *-ed*, OE *-ode*, with variations) and those which make their preterite irregularly with a major change to their stem-form. The *regular* verbs are known as **weak**, the *irregular* ones as **strong**. Thus WEAK *bletsian – iċ bletsige* / *iċ ġebletsode*, 'I bless' / 'I blessed', and STRONG *cuman – iċ cume* / *iċ cōm*, 'I come' / 'I came'.

Some originally strong verbs have become weak in ModE, but in most cases they stayed strong and this fact will help you to recognise many of them. However, the specific vowels used both for the stems and for the variant forms have almost always have changed over time. As we have seen, OE *cōm* (pron. like 'comb') became ModE 'came'. Another example is the verb *scīnan* (pron. 'sheen-an'), ModE 'to shine', with preterite *scān* ('shah-n'), ModE 'shone'.

See further §G.

'To be'

In ModE the verb 'to be' has an irregular mixture of forms ('be', 'am', 'was', 'were', 'is', 'are', etc). These forms come direct from OE: use the table in §G1a to see the similarities. Most derive from the infinitives *bēon* or *wesan* (cf. ModE 'be' and 'was'), and so it is convenient to include all the forms in a composite 'infinitive' designation, **bēon–wesan**. It is beyond any 'weak' or 'strong' classification. So far we have met the following forms:

is, byþ
Both are forms of the *present tense*, 3rd-person *singular*. *Is* is for simple statements, while *byþ* (or *biþ*) is used when some sort of 'gnomic' or proverbial statement is being made or when the *future* is implied, as in sentence 7 above.

wæs
This is the *preterite* 3rd-person *singular*, 'was'. The plural form, **wǣron**, 'were', will be just as easy to recognise when it occurs.

2b: Compound verbs

ModE has inherited the 'compound' verbal structures of OE. Thus we can express a range of ideas using parts of 'to be' or 'to have' with a present or past participle ('he is weeping', 'she has arrived') or verbs such as 'must' or 'can' with an infinitive ('you must talk', 'we can sing'). A selection of OE examples is in the following sentences. Look out also for the *negative*. In OE verbs are negated with *ne* (a light 'neh' sound), 'not', which always comes immediately before its verb.

1. Þīn nama **is ġebletsod** on worulde.
   Thy name is   blessed   in world

   þīn = 'theen'

2. Wē **wyllaþ** *ġe***sēon** þone hǣlend.
   We will   to-see   the   healer

   wē = 'way'; *ġesēon* = 'yeh-say-on'; *þone* = 'thon-eh'

3. Þæt ċild cwæð, 'Se dumba hund ne **mæġ beorcan**'.
   The child said   The dumb   dog not can   bark

   ċild = 'chilled'; *mæġ* = 'ma-y'

4. Lazarus **wæs** swīþe *ġe***wundod** and þā hundas cōmon
   Lazarus was greatly   wounded   the dogs   came

   swīþe = 'sweeth-eh'

   liccedon = 'likk-eh-don'

   tō him and liccedon his wunda.
   to him   licked   his wounds

5. Hwæt **sceolan** wē **drincan**?
   What   shall   we drink

   sceol- = 'sheh-ol'

6. Wē ne **magon drincan** þis wæter for his biternysse.
   We not can   drink   this water for its bitterness

   wē = 'way'

7. Swā **wearð** þæt scip *ġe***fylled** mid crīstenum mannum.
   So became   the ship   filled   with Christian   people

   wearð = 'weh-arth'; *crīst* = 'creest'

8. Þis **wæs** *ġe***worden** on Ēgipta   lande.
   This was   happened   in Egyptians' land

   Ēgipta = 'ay-gip-ta' (hard *g*)

SELECT VOCABULARY

*ġe*bletsod < bletsian [wk.] *to bless*
cōmon < cuman [str.] *to come*
cwæð < cweþan [str.] *to speak, say*
*ġe*fylled < *ġe*fyllan [wk.] *to fill*
liccedon < liccian [wk.] *to lick*
mæġ, magon < magan *to be able*
    [see note below]

sceolan < sculan *to have to* [see note]
*ġe*sēon [str.] *to see*
wearð, *ġe*worden < weorþan [str.] *to become*
    [see note]
*ġe*wundod < *ġe*wundian [wk.] *to wound*