Old English: Beowulf and other Anglo-Saxon Poetry
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Brief History
Old English is a Germanic language spoken in Britain from the mid 5th to the mid 12th centuries. The Germanic people (Angles and Saxons) first came to Britain in the late 4th Century, originally hired by the Celts to fight the Scots, but then turning on the Celts to stay in Britain. In the 700s came the first Viking attacks on English and eventually these people settled in the North of the country in an area referred to as the Danelaw. Old Norse (also a Germanic language) had a significant influence on English, seen historically by the changes in Old English starting in the north and spreading south. Among the various influences of Old Norse are modern day words such as words like “sky”.

The Alphabet

Yogh, Wynn, can be represented by modern g, w respectively. Ash, Eth, and Thorn are usually represented by their modern day typeface equivalents, æ, ð, and þ respectively.

Below are images of the pronunciations of the Old English letters using the International Phonetic Alphabet (or IPA) (images from omniglot.com)

Specific pronunciation differences or changes from “Old English and it’s Closest Relatives” By Orrin Robinson

/c/: as [tʃ] before or after original vowels /i/ and /e/ (before umlaut)
as [k] elsewhere

/g/: as [g] when doubled /gg/ or when preceded by /n/ as in /ng/
as [j] before the front vowels /i/ and /e/, after /i/ and /e/ when syllable final
as [Y] elsewhere

/sc/ : Robinson states only the pronunciation [J] and makes no mention of [sk]
as a pronunciation for this letter

/f/ : as [v] between voiced sounds
as [f] elsewhere

/s/ : as [z] between voiced sounds
as [s] elsewhere

/h/ : as [h] initially and before vowels
as [c] finally and between consonants

/x/ : Robinson states this is pronounced as [xs], not [ks] as stated by the image above

/u/ : /u/ occasionally appears instead of /w/ and thus has the pronunciation [w]

Notes on linguistic terminology:
**Umlaut** – Umlaut is vowel harmony. It is a common occurrence in Germanic languages and makes vowels in one part of a word conform in place of articulation (whether the sound is made by the tongue towards the front or back of the mouth) to a vowel in a later syllable of the word.

**Voicing** – voicing is the distinguishing feature between sounds with otherwise similar features such as place and manner of articulation (where and how you make the sound in your mouth). Voiced sounds are made by vibrating the vocal folds as air passes through the glottis (effectively, vibrating the vocal chords). The difference is noticeable if you make a long /s/ sound and then make a /z/ sound. The vibration when you make the /z/ is voicing as [z] is a voiced sound and [s] is an unvoiced sound.

**Anglo-Saxon Poetry**
Anglo-Saxon oral tradition was influenced by Scandinavian traditions, as seen in both word borrowings and Scandinavian themes used in the poetry. There were traditions both of spontaneous poetry, called lausavisur, which were random, impromptu stanzas that was not uncommon at the time, and fixed form poetry in the forms of oral tradition passing on historical sagas and dramatic poems such as elegies. Though poets created the works, the poetry was usually written by scribes based on a poets telling of the story.
Beowulf (first 10 lines of prologue)
HWÆT, WE GAR-DEna in geardagum,  
þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,  
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!  
oft Scyld Scefing sceafen ðreatum,  
monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,  
egsode eorlas, syððan ærest wearð  
feasceaf funden: he ðæs frofre gebad,  
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,  
oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra  
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,  
gomban gyldan; þæt wæs god cyning!

LO, praise of the prowess of people-kings  
of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,  
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!  
Oft Scyld the Scefing from squadroned foes,  
from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore,  
aving the earls. Since erst he lay  
friendless, a foundling, fate repaid him:  
for he waxed under welkin, in wealth he throve,  
till before him the folk, both far and near,  
who house by the whale-path, heard his mandate,  
gave him gifts: a good king he!

Wulf and Eadwacer
Old English with line-by-line Modern English translation

Leodum is minum     swylce him mon lac gife;
To my people, it is as if someone has given them a gift
willað hy hine aþecgan     gif he on þreat cymeð.
They intend to kill him if he comes to them with a band of men,
Ungelic is us.
It is different for us
Wulf is on iege,     ic on oþerre.
Wulf is on an island and I on another
Fæst is þæt eglond,     fenne biworpen.
That island is secure, surrounded by fen
Sindon wælreowe     weras þær on ige;
There, on that island, are bloodthirsty men!
willað hy hine aþecgan     gif he on þreat cymeð.
They will kill him if he comes with a band of men!
Ungelic is us.
It is different for us
Wulfes ic mines widlastum     wenum dogode,
Long journeys of hope for my Wulf, I pursued
þonne hit wæs renig weder     ond ic reotugu sæt,
Whenever it was rainy weather and I sat crying
þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde,
When that warrior took me in his arms
wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæþre eac lað.
For me it was a relief, but it was also hateful
Wulf, min Wulf! wena me þine
Wulf, my Wulf! My hopes for you have caused
seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas,
This sickness, your absence,
murnende mod, nales meteliste.
My mourning heart; not lack of food
Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer? Uncerne eargne hwelp
Do you hear me, Eadwacer? Our wretched whelp,
bireð wulf to wuda.
Wulf will bear to the woods!
Þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,
One easily tears asunder that which was never joined,
uncer giedd geador.
Our song together.

References:


http://www.faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/anthology/wulf.html
Glosses (word by word translations) of Wulf and Eadwacer

Provides text and recordings of several segments of Beowulf

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/beowulf-oe.html
Actual Old English text of Beowulf
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/beowulf.html
Modern English translation of Beowulf

http://home.comcast.net/~modean52/oeme_dictionaries.htm
Old English Dictionary

http://fred.wheatonma.edu/wordpressmu/mdrout
A large collection of recordings of Old English poetry readings with translations

http://www.omniglot.com/writing/oldenglish.htm
Omniglot’s page on Old English