

Exam Specifications

(Revision of October 1, 2026)

The exam for **B.Eng.602** runs 60 minutes and takes place on **Wednesday 17 February at 10am sharp** in our regular classroom.

It will comprise two elements: a close commentary and open questions. Count ca. 20–25 minutes for your commentary and ca. 35–40 minutes for the open questions.

Close Commentary (40%)

For your close commentary, you will be presented with an Old English passage circa 25 lines in length, selected from the passages set for *translation* on the **syllabus** and discussed in class. **A narrower selection of these readings will be singled out as possible exam material towards the end of term.** Your task will be to supply a commentary on the excerpt. The format of your commentary may resemble **that of B.Eng.601/M.EP.02c**, but with even less emphasis on introducing the text as a whole, and accordingly even greater focus on (1) information contained within the printed excerpt and (2) any aspects of the text(s) relevant to the themes and information touched on in the excerpt. Similarly, you should not spend time describing the regular conventions of Old English metre unless you have a point to make about the exam passage. In your commentary you should not translate the passage, but instead discuss the themes it addresses and any points of scholarly analysis of which you are aware (no need to identify the scholars who have raised them unless you happen to remember their names), as well as any formal features or literary devices you consider worth pointing out (along with your best stab at their functions). You may explain at some length any theological conventions of relevance to the passage. You would do well to single out words and phrases deserving of special mention in your analysis.

To prepare for this task, familiarize yourself with the language of the passages set for translation well enough to be able to identify and translate words and phrases within your excerpt that contribute to a theme or tone you have identified, but also study your notes on the content both from in-class discussion and from our set weekly readings of scholarship where they concern the passage set for translation. The commentaries made available on Stud.IP likewise make for good revision material, but so does anything you can glean from published commentaries where available, such as that of Doane on *Genesis B* and the Low German *Genesis*. See the commentary overleaf for a model (in this case on an excerpt from *Beowulf*).

Open Questions (20% each)

This section covers everything discussed in class, as well as the scholarship set for weekly reading. Rather than expect gotcha questions on obscure references in the scholarship, focus your energy in the first instance on ideas reinforced by their introduction into class discussion and their mention in class slides. Here too, the commentaries uploaded to Stud.IP make for useful revision material. These questions may print passages from the poetry for your reference, but if so those passages will be given with text and translation side by side so you can make reference to the original without having to decipher it.

Example Commentary

- 80 Hē bēot ne ālēh, bēagas dælde,
sinc æt symle. Sele hlifade,
hēah ond horngēap, heaðowylma bād,
lāðan liges; ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn
þæt se ecghete āþumswēorum
85 æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde.
Þā se ellengāst earfoðlice
þrāge gepolode, sē þe in þystrum bād,
þæt hē dogora gehwām drēam gehyrde
hlūdne in healle; þær wæs hearpan swēg,
90 swutol sang scopes. Sægde sē þe cūþe
frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,
cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga eorðan worhte,
wlitebeorhtne wang, swā wæter bebūgeð,
gesette sigehrēþig sunnan ond mōnan,
95 lēoman to lēohte landbūendum,
ond gefræt Wade foldan sceatas
leomum ond lēafum, lif eac gescēop
cynna gehwylcum þāra ðe cwise hwyrfaþ.
Swā ðā drihtguman drēamum lifdon
100 ēadiglice, oððæt ān ongan
fyrene fremman fēond on helle.

Beowulf 89b–98 is sometimes referred to as the Song of Creation; this episode is set just after the completion of Heorot, the royal hall of the Danish Scylding dynasty, by order of King Hrothgar. The creation of the hall itself resembles creation, but scholars have often compared Heorot to a church as well. In the excerpt, we learn that a *scop* or court poet sings of creation in the newly completed hall in a poem resembling *Cædmon's Hymn* as well as the biblical creation account in Genesis 1. At the end of the excerpt there is a momentary and surely intentional ambiguity of reference: lines 99–101 probably refer to Heorot, its inhabitants, and

Grendel, but coming as they do at the end of the scop's account of creation, they may at first be taken to apply to Eden, Adam and Eve, and Satan within the scop's poem.

Lines 81–85 employ a type of foreshadowing characteristic of *Beowulf*, hinting that Heorot will be burnt down in a conflict between a father-in-law and a son-in-law. It is suggested elsewhere in the poem that this will be Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld. In both the literature and the history of the early Middle Ages, elite marriages often served diplomatic functions (the women in these marriages are referred to in the scholarship as “peace-weavers”), and Hrothgar repeatedly shows diplomatic intentions, but the poet here signals that his attempts at peace will not work. The conflict here foreshadowed is not in fact told within the confines of *Beowulf*, and so it is a typical example of the poet seemingly expecting his or her audience to be familiar with the material.

Lines 80–81a refer to the heroic economy, in which it is a warlord's duty to shower his warriors with prestige objects, in return for which they must risk their lives for him. The word *bēot* “vow, boast” is here (l. 80) used of Hrothgar's vow to build a hall (and/or to be generous with his prestige objects), but it is also the word used for vows spoken by warriors in just such a hall, typically over mead, to the effect that they will be brave in battle. Towards the end of the poem, Wiglaf appeals to just such vows when he addresses his fellow warriors as they drag their feet coming to Beowulf's aid in his fight against the dragon.

The excerpt also contains the only explanation given for Grendel's hostility towards the Danish court: he cannot stand the sound of merrymaking in the hall (86–89). This is sometimes interpreted as envy, but scholars often make a connection with the religious content of the scop's song, suggesting that Grendel, elsewhere said to be a descendant of Cain, the first murderer according to the Book of Genesis, is by his wicked nature opposed to all that is good and Christian.