

# Prose (n.)

## *In relation to Literature*

Prose appeared in lexical form within the English language in the 14c, deriving its name from the Middle-French *prosa* which was cut from the Latin *prosa oratio* meaning 'direct speech.' Prose, despite its etymological connection to the Greek *pezós lógos*, was a little known or respected form of literature in 14c England. At this time verse held its archaic regard as the higher form of writing, an attitude left over from the Greeks. The educated were taught to read and write mostly in Latin, and the common tongue was neglected from written form. Writers such as John Wycliffe and Geoffrey Chaucer are recognised as some of the first practitioners of prose in English with works *Wycliffe Bible* and *The Tale of Meribee* respectively. As Gangi Chen (2) explains *'for a long time the study of prose has been overlooked and even the definition of it lacks the precision and to some degree is very vague.'* As a keyword within the culture of Literature, prose becomes a very difficult word to define and pin down to set of rules or recognisable structures— the very act of writing prose itself defies the definition of prose.'

From the Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory (3) — *'In theory there are as many different kinds of prose as there are to write it.'* From its Greek origin down through centuries and empires, prose has landed in the 21st century as the most widely read and least recognised form of literature.

*'After sleeping a few hours, I stole quietly out of camp, and climbed the mountain that stands between the two glaciers. The ground was frozen, making the climbing difficult in the steepest places; but the views over the icy bay, sparkling beneath the stars, were enchanting. It seemed then a sad thing that any part of so precious a night had been lost in sleep.'* — John Muir, *Glaciers by Starlight* (6)

*pezós lógos*— speech that goes on foot. The Greeks referred to prose with a comparison to the more accepted form of writing — *emmetros lógos*, meaning measured speech, or speech that goes on wings, verse. Great works of verse, epics and histories were traditionally written in verse and held in high regard. Prose was seen as ordinary, common. Although we see prose in a similar way now, common and ordinary were terms by no means sought by the Greek writers.

When Aristides chose to write about the Gods in prose styling, he found himself defending his doing so, as Trapp (8) elucidates *'he argues that poets cannot reasonably claim sole rights over the praising of the gods for a whole series of reasons, ranging from the greater degree of system and completeness that goes with prose as opposed to verse delivery, to the priority of prose over verse in age and value, and (most strikingly) the alleged ability of prose to embody the key quality of metron (measure-metre) to a higher degree.'*

Though the word *be* may be traced back to its Greek form, the English *prose* finds its most accurate source from the Latin definition in its use and understanding in Middle-English onwards to present.

*Prosa oratio* — straightforward or direct speech. With the Latin definition we find the closest correlation to *prose's* understood contemporary meaning. The first known example of *prosa oratio* comes from the 160BC *De Agri Cultura* by Marcus Porches