

CHAPTER 1

Old English metre – an introduction to historical scholarship and selected theoretical frameworks

1.1. Introduction: defining Old English verse

Systematic studies of Old English metre go back to the end of the nineteenth century when Eduard Sievers proposed a descriptive taxonomy of old Germanic alliterative verse lines.¹ His classification system of five metrical types, presented in *Altgermanische Metrik* (1893), has been taken as a reference theory ever since. Sievers' ideas grew out of his own research on rhythm and poetry but his achievement in the field would not have been so outstanding had it not been preceded by several centuries of scholarly work on Old English texts. Laborious survey of the Anglo-Saxon literary corpus conducted by successive generations of early modern scholars paved the way for efficient analysis of metrical structures undertaken by nineteenth- and twentieth-century linguists.

Anglo-Saxons did not leave any descriptive or prescriptive accounts of the versification rules comparable to the thirteenth-century Old Icelandic *Háttatal* by Snorri Sturluson.² Native authors

¹ Twentieth-century scholarship also owes much to the work of Heusler (1899-1891). His rhythmical theory of metre is mentioned briefly at the end of this chapter (section 1.3.5.) in connection with his later proponents – Pope and Creed.

² The *Háttatal* is a section in the *Younger Edda* which contains a catalogue of metrical patterns used by the Icelandic skalds. Despite its occasionally unclear fragments it has been regarded as a useful authority on early Germanic versification

like Bede or Aldhelm, who composed poems in the vernacular and Latin, wrote treatises on the art of poetic metre but these works were devoted to the elucidation of classical versification rules.³ If we can learn from these authors anything concerning vernacular poetics at all, it is, paradoxically, via the Latin poems they wrote. Both Bede and Aldhelm were versed in Old English poetry and the knowledge of vernacular versification rules seems to have influenced the Latin compositions they so willingly indulged in.⁴ The Anglo-Latin

and a complementary source of information for modern metrists (Fulk 2001: 130); cf. Modern English translation by Faulkes (1987: 165-220).

³ *De arte metrica* by Venerable Bede is 'a systematic exposition of Latin versification fortified by a judicious compilation of examples from Virgil and Christian poets together with selected grammarians' comments' (Brown 2009: 22). The intended readers of the book were Bede's monastic students who, as speakers of a Germanic language, had no sense of classical Latin vocalic quantity or quantitative verse and had to learn it. Bede's important and unparalleled contribution to metrical history is a discussion of accentual metre which, by and large, displaced quantitative Latin verse in medieval poetry (*ibidem*, pp. 22-23). Bede's orderly text is much different from Aldhelm's practical outline of the principles underlying Latin hexameter presented in two short treatises – *De metris* and *De pedum regulis* – and illustrated by a collection of one hundred versified *Enigmata*. Aldhelm's intense interest in versification is discernible throughout all his works (Orchard 1994: 6). For a comparative account of Aldhelm's and Bede's contribution to the study of classical metrics see Ruff (2005).

⁴ Aldhelm expressed his predilection for composing Latin verse in a boastful remark typical of his style: *neminem nostrae stirpis genitum et Germanicae gentis cunabilis confotum in huiuscemodi negotio ante nostram mediocritatem tant opere desudasse* (No one born of our race and nourished in the cradles of the Germanic people has laboured so greatly in this kind of pastime before our humble self); Latin quotation and Modern English translation after Orchard (*ibidem*, p. 45). As for Bede, he composed Latin hymns and inserted shorter poems, distichs and single lines in his prose works (Brown 2009: 88 and references to the editions of Bede's Latin verse there). A longer meditative poem *De Die Iudicii* has been attributed to Bede but the evidence for his authorship is not entirely conclusive. This poem is closely linked with the vernacular via its Old English paraphrase *Judgement Day II* (formerly *Be Domes Dæge*) registered in Ms. 201 CCCC (see below, Chapter 4). As for vernacular compositions, there are, apparently, no extant Old English poems composed either by Bede or Aldhelm but we have evidence that such pieces had been written by both (see Bede's *Letter to Cuthbert* and the *Letter on the Death of Bede*; for references see Brown *ibidem*, p. 93; and *Vita Aldhelmi* by William of Malmesbury; cf. also King Alfred the Great's testimony in Asser's *Vita Ælfredi regis Anglo-Saxonum*; see Orchard, *ibidem*, p. 5).

metrical interference can be traced especially in Aldhelm's works. According to Orchard (1994) 'he packed his octosyllabic verses with an unparalleled degree of alliteration, and may be credited here (as in his hexameters) with writing verse stylistically reminiscent of vernacular Old English poetry. [...] His lead was followed in his own lifetime by eager students such as Æthilwald, who again changed the form, and, at times, can almost be said to be writing Old English verse in Latin' (p. 71).⁵ Alliteration is also ubiquitous in Aldhelm's prose (cf. Orchard *ibidem*, p. 45), which raises the question of the boundary between the two genres.

Undoubtedly, Anglo-Saxons must have distinguished between verse and prose. A description of the *Exeter Codex* as being *on lēodwīsan geworht* (lit. in song-manner made) in a contemporary donation list to the Exeter Cathedral implies that the distinction was viable for the vernacular (Lass 1997: 101).⁶ However, medieval categorization of

⁵ Orchard (1994: 71-72; 119-125) claims that this aspect of Aldhelmian work has been understudied. The analysis of his metrical compositions in which he blended native and foreign elements together in a typically Anglo-Saxon way may yet prove more relevant to the literary history of the language than it has been thought. William of Malmesbury, Aldhelm's twelfth-century biographer, gives a testimony to his proficiency in Old English vernacular poetry and notes that 'he combined native and Christian elements in his verse to delight his audience at a time when in Northumbria an illiterate cowherd called Cædmon was attempting something similar, according to Bede' (*ibidem*, p. 5); see also Lapidge (1979) for an analysis of Aldhelm's compositions and traces of vernacular poetic techniques in his extant Latin verse.

⁶ The assumption that the entry in Leofric's donation list refers to the *Exeter Book* has never been ascertained, though most scholars give it the benefit of the doubt. Krapp and Dobbie (1936: ix) argue that the brief description quoted above refers almost positively to *Codex Exoniensis*, though they admit that 'the ground of the proof is limited to the fact that no other book is known to have been among the Leofric's donations to which the description in the list would apply' (*ibidem*, p. ix). Other scholars working on the history of the codex are more cautious in giving their opinion on that matter. Notwithstanding, the research on the Exeter *scriptorium* indicates that the *Exeter Book*, composed and written approximately between 965 and 975, belonged among a group of manuscripts held in the cathedral library at least from the mid-eleventh century (Muir 2000: 1-3; Muir 2006, and references given there). The list itself has been later bound in with the manuscript (Muir 2006). For further details concerning Leofric and his donation list see the introductory chapters to the *Facsimile* by Chambers, Förster and Flower (1933: 1-9; 10-32).

literary works need not necessarily coincide with modern classificatory criteria. Crucially, the distinction may not have been binary. It seems plausible that contemporary Anglo-Saxons regarded literary texts as a continuum in which the boundaries of highly rhythmical prose and verse could partially overlap (see McIntosh 1949).⁷ It seems that ‘modern conceptions of form and genre are, at the very least, rather more fixed than they appear to have been for Old English scribes at work in the many manuscripts that survive from the period, 890-1200’ (Treharne 2009: 95).

Regrettably, scribes seem to have left few unequivocal hints crucial for the reconstruction of the underlying structure of the earliest vernacular verse. With few exceptions early medieval texts, both vernacular and Latin, were represented in the same format of continuous lines running from margin to margin and covering the entire writing space on a manuscript folio.⁸ As Lass (1997) puts it: ‘lineation of an Old English (putative) poem as ‘verse’ is essentially a second-order construct. [...] For Old English we don’t actually know what constituted a ‘poem’ as opposed to a piece of a highly alliterative prose, for instance; lineation of poetry to show what it is comes later in the English tradition’ (p. 101).

Modern classification of some Old English texts as verse hinges on reconstructed principles of metre. In spite of many uncertainties concerning metrical parameters, there are some indisputable tenets supported by statistical tendencies which allow an adequate description of the metrical patterns. Such metrical definition underlies the standard current edition of Old English verse collected in the

Despite inconclusive evidence, Bredehoft (2004) takes it for granted that the note in Leofric’s book-list pertains to this codex and argues that the description can be taken as the starting point for a modern understanding of Old English verse since ‘here a nearly contemporary Anglo-Saxon witness specifically identifies the texts of the Exeter Book as poetic’ (p. 143).

⁷ Acknowledging the potential breach in the attitude towards written texts between Anglo-Saxon and modern times Skeat laid out Ælfric’s alliterative prose as verse in his nineteenth-century edition.

⁸ Very few Old English texts were lineated. For a study on lineation in Old English poetry see Plummer (1994). For an analysis of the developing spatial and graphic conventions in Old English verse representation see O’Brien O’Keeffe (1990).

six-volume *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* by Krapp and Dobbie (1931-1953). The selection includes early inscriptions and late compositions and is, inevitably, metrically disparate. Some texts, for instance the *Paris Psalter* metrical psalms, are defined in it as highly irregular as compared to the normative verses of *Beowulf*. Others, for instance some Chronicle poems, have been left out on account of their metrical anomalies.⁹ Recently, Momma (1997) has called into question the efficacy of traditional, current understanding of Old English metre for defining a corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry:

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When based on more than one poem, Old English metre no longer seems homogeneous; and it ceases to seem unique when compared to other alliterative composition. Unfortunately no previous metrical theories have offered criteria with which to describe Old English poetry as a whole or to separate Old English poetry from other alliterative compositions. (Momma 1997: 21)

Following her lead, Bredehoft (2004) proposes to reconsider and, perhaps, redefine the boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus in the light of manuscript evidence however meagre it may seem. He argues that metrical cues alone are insufficient for defining the poetical canon correctly and explains that some of the irregular poetical texts 'are distinguished from the surrounding prose by precisely the same sorts of markers used to indicate other textual boundaries: the use of textual space or of visually prominent letters' (p. 143). Bredehoft maintains that the pointing used occasionally to mark metrical structure may have been less valuable to readers in initially identifying a passage of verse than the highly visual cue of capital letters and

⁹ Krapp and Dobbie (1942) include several but not all Chronicle poems in volume VI of the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*: 'A number of other passages in irregular metre, in the later years of the Chronicle, have been omitted from this edition' (pp. xxxii-xxxiii). In a footnote they explain further that '[i]t is not always easy to draw the line between irregular metre and rhythmical prose' (*ibidem*, p. xxxiii). There are, presumably, more examples of texts containing embedded poetry or, at least, highly poetic prose, likewise disguised by the Anglo-Saxon custom of writing both verse and prose in continuous lines across the manuscript page; see an analysis of homilies from the *Vercelli Book* (Wright 2003: 245-262).