

On Muddle and Madness in Medieval Metrics

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A Poetician must, like a competitive and ambitious athlete, keep in training. When my preparations for this lecture-performance tonight were well in hand, I thought to find something new to read as a diversion and exercise. I obtained a copy of this, 'Analysing Older English', published by Cambridge University Press in 2012. It is edited by David Denison, Ricardo Bermúdez-Otero, Chris McCully and Emma Moore. There are thirteen essays in it. There is one on metrical matters by Geoffrey Russom titled 'What explanatory metrics has to say about the history of English function words.' Neither the title of the essay nor the introduction to it by McCully and Denison were immediately enticing; but I recognised the terms 'trochaic' and 'foot' as coming from the classical system of metrics, and a glance at Russom's text showed me that he was presenting many examples of so-called verse 'half-lines' from 'Beowulf' and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. So I pressed on, and have read the essay a number of times. It has inspired me to this 'rant' as an unexpected insertion in this address about rhythm in English poetry over thirteen hundred years.

There may be here tonight an undergraduate or even a post-graduate student considering spending time on study and research in the metrics of English verse. Here is a health and safety warning. The field of medieval metrics is full of treacherous, hidden holes, marshes and rocks concealed by an overgrowth of thorny weeds some of which are poisonous.

You may ask, how dare I take such an arrogant stance when my knowledge of the linguistics and phonetics of medieval verse is tiny beside that of Professor Russom? My answer is this: though I may have very little idea of how to bake any sort of cake, I can quite simply and reliably tell how fresh and wholesome and inviting in texture one is when I have bought it.

Professor Russom's essay/cake is of a peculiar texture, and has some stale or impure ingredients in it; and in this way it is typical of much that is on the shelves marked 'Poetics' and

prosody.' Just as I know the sorts of things that go into the making of a cake - flour, butter, eggs, honey and so forth -, I know, as you do, that in metrical matters we generally deal with

'measured' verses which flow rhythmically in time.

Further, we know that the 'measures' or 'feet' in any piece of poetry are generally expected to be of about equal duration and to share a rhythmic mode; and we know that the main stresses in a line of verse thus usually fall in a regular, a patterned way. It is also generally accepted that in alliterative medieval verse there are usually four main beats or stresses falling in as clear a pattern as possible. There may sometimes be more stresses in a verse-line; but there are rarely, if ever, fewer.

However, when I as it were put my nose to Russom's cake I find it to have a rather strange and dull smell. Nowhere in his essay does he use the term 'rhythm'. Nowhere. Nowhere does he give us any idea how the feet in his 'metrical' analysis of the verses are to be compared in the amount of time that it is intended they should be spoken in. Thus we have no idea how he thinks that we may perform to our pleasure these two great poems the metrics of which he is discussing. It is all most peculiar.

Now let us slice into Russom's cake so that we can better assess its texture and quality. Do not try to read all of this extract now. Allow me to point up matters of particular interest to me that you may later consider more fully.

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The most important features of Old English metre for our purposes are presented below as rules B1-B3 (adapted from Russom 1998: 216-19).

(A)

Metrical Rules for *Beowulf* (about 3,200 lines)

- B1 The foot has the stress pattern of a native word.
- (a) A foot is ideally realised as a word but may be realised as a word group with an appropriate stress pattern, at a cost in metrical complexity.
 - (b) Unstressed words may appear before a foot as extrametrical syllables under certain conditions, at a cost in complexity.
 - (c) Metrical complexity is increased by employment of foot patterns that correspond to low-frequency word patterns in the natural language.

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(B)

- B2 Alliteration binds word feet into two-foot verses and verses into two-verse lines, operating like the Old English rule of compound stress.
- B3 *The principle of closure*: Verse patterns of greater complexity are more appropriately used in the first half of the line (as a-verses); patterns of lesser complexity are more appropriately used in the closing half (as b-verses).

Rule B1a makes important distinctions between verses with the same stress pattern:

- (C)
- | | | | |
|-----|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (1) | <i>folc ond / rīce²</i>
'people and kingdom' | S:x/Sx
type A (complex) | <i>Beo</i> 1179a
a: 118X, b: 31X |
| (2) | <i>hȳran / scolde</i>
'were compelled to obey' | Sx/Sx
type A (simplest) | <i>Beo</i> 10b
a: 389X, b: 511X |

Items (1) and (2) are both variants of Sievers type A with two trochaic feet, but item (1), which realises the first foot as a word group, is more complex than item (2), which realises each foot as a trochaic word. Rule B₃, the principle of closure, is formulated for Old English metre, but stricter adherence to metrical norms at the end of the line can be observed in a wide variety of metrical traditions and appears to be a poetic universal (Hayes 1983). Rule B₃ explains why the more complex item (1) has higher relative frequency as an a-verse in *Beowulf*: 79 per cent (118:31), as compared with 42 per cent for item (2) (389:511).³

We will have much to say here about rule B1b, which expresses the resistance of the metre to extrametrical function words as a cost in complexity. The complexity of a verse also depends in part on the frequency of the word patterns that constitute its metrical feet (rule B1c). Sievers type A is the simplest type because both of its feet correspond to the most common Old English word pattern, which is well known to be trochaic (Dresher and

(D)

³ In word-foot notations to the right of items (1) and (2), 'S' represents a metrical position ideally occupied by primary stress, 'x' represents a position ideally occupied by an unstressed syllable, a slash (/) represents the boundary between the two feet of the verse, and a colon represents a word boundary of special interest. Alliterating constituents are in boldface. In verse numbers, 'a' identifies the citation as the opening verse of the line, 'b' as the closing verse. Old English examples are from Fulk, Björk and Niles (2008) or from Krapp and Dobbie (1931–53), with minor changes in diacritics for consistency. Old Saxon examples are from Behaghel (1984). Middle English examples are from Tolkien and Gordon (1967).

⁴ To simplify comparison of *Beowulf* with *SGGK*, I have made the verse counts as straightforward as possible. The effect of word boundaries in type A₁ can be brought out even more sharply by excluding examples with double alliteration, which are confined to the a-verse for that reason alone (Russom 2002: 247–8).

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Lahiri 1991). Two-word examples of the other familiar types are provided as items (3)–(6). We will also be concerned with the types represented by items (7) and (8).

- (E)
- | | | | |
|-----|---|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| (3) | <i>on / morgen-tīd</i>
'in the morning-time' | x/Sxs
type B | <i>Beo</i> 484b |
| (4) | <i>in / geār-dagum</i>
'in days of yore' | x/Ssx
type C | <i>Beo</i> 1b |
| (5) | <i>fēond / man-cynnes</i>
'enemy of mankind' | S/Ssx
type D | <i>Beo</i> 164b |
| (6) | <i>bēah-horda / meard</i>
'lord of the ring-hoard' | Ssx/S
type E | <i>Beo</i> 921b |
| (7) | <i>Dū scealt tō / frōfre / meorþan</i>
'you shall be as a comfort' | (x)xx/Sx/Sx
hypermetrical | <i>Beo</i> 1707b |
| (8) | <i>Ic hine / cūðe</i>
'I knew him' | (x)xx/Sx
type A₃ | <i>Beo</i> 372a |

There is now substantial consensus about rules for the Middle English b-verse, presented as G1–3 below (compare Cable 1988; Duggan 1988; Putter and Stokes 2000). Unlike rules B1–B3, G1–G3 govern the stress pattern of the line and have nothing to say about word boundaries. There is no discernible foot structure within the verse.

(F) Metrical Rules for the b-verse in *SGGK* (about 2,025 alliterative lines)

- (G1) The b-verse has one and only one *long dip* consisting of two or more adjacent unstressed syllables.
- (G2) The b-verse has exactly two syllables with metrically significant stress.
- (G3) The b-verse ends with a trochaic (strong-weak) stress pattern.

The Middle English items (9) and (10) below have the same stress pattern as an Old English hypermetrical verse (item (7)). Since this pattern conforms to rules G1–G3, the prevailing consensus represents items (9) and (10) as equally acceptable in *SGGK*.

- | | | | |
|------|---|---------|-------------------------|
| (9) | <i>and ȝet flaȝ I neuer</i>
'and yet I never fled' | xxS:xSx | <i>SGGK</i> 2276b
6X |
| (10) | <i>and his highe kynde</i>
'and his noble kindred' | xxSx:Sx | <i>SGGK</i> 5b
308X |

Of 314 total examples in *SGGK*, 308 are like item (10), in which the first stressed word is trochaic. Only 6 are like item (9), in which the first stressed word is monosyllabic. Variants like item (9) have even lower frequency than variants like item (11), which has more than one long dip and accordingly violates rule G1.

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- | | | | |
|------|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| (11) | <i>of þe court þat he were</i>
'that he was from the court' | *xxS:xxSx
(starred as unmetrical) | <i>SGGK</i> 903b
8X |
|------|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------|

(G)

- | | | | |
|------|--|---|-------------------------|
| (12) | <i>as hit best semed</i>
'as it seemed best' | xxS:sx | <i>SGGK</i> 73b
218X |
| (13) | <i>þat ȝe put on me</i>
'that you put on me' | xxS:sx, not *xxS:x:S
(with enclitic <i>me</i>) | <i>SGGK</i> 1277b |
| (14) | <i>I nolde go myth þe</i>
'I would not go with you' | xxxS:sx, not *xxS:x:S
(with enclitic <i>þe</i>) | <i>SGGK</i> 2150b |

If a Middle English b-verse begins with a long dip followed by a stressed monosyllable, a trochaic constituent will normally come next, as in item (12), which has the stress contour of Old English type C. There are 218 examples like item (12), as compared with the 6 examples like item (9). Items (13) and (14) may look exceptional, but are best scanned like item (12). The b-verse must conclude with a trochaic stress pattern (rule G3), so it seems necessary to assume that the preposition bears phrasal stress and the pronoun is enclitic, as in current American English pronunciation of this syntactic structure. For comparable examples in Old English, see Fulk (1992: 184–5).

First see how at (A) Russom provides us with what are called "Metrical Rules for 'Beowulf.'" It sounds as if the metrist is laying down the rules when he might perhaps only be in a position to suggest what may have been the conventions that were prevalent in the poetry of the time.

Then observe, at (B), Russom's "Rule B2." He is here following a convention introduced by earlier scholars, one of considering the Old English verse-line as being in two parts or 'halves' usually called the 'a-verse' and the 'b-verse'. This approach can be useful; but it can also obscure the fact that the two 'halves' constitute a

single verse-line that is to be considered as a whole 'furrow.'

At (C) you will find how in his first examples Russom uses a system of metrical notation which is explained in the footnote at (D). Capital 'S' indicates a syllable with primary stress; 'x' represents an unstressed syllable; a slash represents the boundary between two "feet."

At (E) we can consider further examples of 'half-verses'. In his examples (3) and (4), 'on morgen-tid' and 'in gear-dagum', Russom introduces into his metrical notation a lower case 's', without any explanation. This presumably indicates a 'secondary stress' or some-such. He is thus stating that these 'half-verses', and presumably many others in 'Beowulf', only have one main stress. It follows, then, that by Russom's estimation many verse-lines are 'invalid' in so far as they do not fulfil the generally accepted basic pattern in an Old English verse-line of four main stresses. This is nonsense.

Now consider where in these two examples Russom places his foot divisions. He is suggesting that the single syllable 'on' constitutes a foot equivalent to 'morgen-tid', and that the syllable 'in' is likewise a foot equivalent to 'gear-dagum'. This is nonsense. All that we need to do is read the phrases naturally and rhythmically, using 'on' and 'in' as anacruses, and stress the two pieces of each compound equally.

A new problem presents itself with Russom's next two examples. It would appear that to Russom the word 'feond' in his example (5) and the words 'beah' and 'weard' in example (6) constitute single syllables as each is represented in his notation by a capital S. Are these so-called syllables to be voiced in the same amount of time as 'on' and 'in' in examples (3) and (4)? Further, how are the pairs of feet in examples (5) and (6) to be balanced in time, made rhythmical in the speaking of the verse? Since Russom has nothing to say on matters of time and rhythm, we must move on.

With his example (8) he presents us with another type of half-line from 'Beowulf'. This one does not in his opinion contain more than one syllable with any stress. Presumably he thinks that it

should be read 'ich hine/cupe' with a peculiar underplaying of both pronouns. Surely not. This is perverse nonsense. The way that the language worked then was not so very different from the way that it works for us now. The phrase must read either 'ich hine/cupe' or 'ich/hine/cupe' with anacrusis; and in the first reading it is hard to resist giving 'hine' some sort of 'secondary stress'.

At my(F) Russom brings us to 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. He tells us that there is now "substantial consensus about rules for the Middle English b-verse, presented as G 1-3 below." He then says: "There is no discernible foot structure within the verse." There is no discernible foot structure within the b-verse of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'? That is an absurd statement. I have translated the whole poem and recorded it in the Middle English and in translation. I am quite sure that I can prove to you as clearly as may be possible that every one of the poem's two thousand five hundred and thirty full verse-lines has a readily discernible, regular and consistent foot structure, metre and rhythm ~ though I would, if I may, use the term 'measure' rather than the term 'foot'.

If you now go to my (G) you will see how Russom offers one sort of partial demonstration of his nonsensical assertion by way of his examples (12), (13) and (14). He claims that in each of these b-verses there is only one full stress. However, there is no good reason at all, linguistically, phonetically or metrically, not to put full stress on 'semed', 'me' and 'pe' ~ 'Shall I compare thee to a Summers day?' Russom claims that there are 218 examples like (12)...

Is Russom's analysis of English verse sound? Is it sensible? Is it sane? No; no; no. What we are getting from him is muddle and madness, not metrics. This metrist does not tell us what the metre and rhythm is of the poems the metrical structure of which he is claiming to elucidate for us.

The more that I read analyses of this sort ~ and I have been doing so for thirty years, the more I get the sense that all this 'footling' with feet and syllables in the name of 'historical metrics' is getting us nowhere. It seems to me to be not simply misguided:

It would, rather, appear that there is no intention to seek and propose a simple solution to the question 'What is the rhythm of "Beowulf"?' It would seem that in these matters there is a process of deliberate intellectual fraud. Let me say it again: I think that these matters are subject to a pernicious process of intellectual fraud.

The editors and publishers of this book should be ashamed of allowing this essay to insinuate itself amongst others that may well be sound and worthy.

There, Mr Convenor; I have spat cake all over the floor. If you do not wish to summarily throw me out, I will prove my point here with a performance of some verses from 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,' in Middle English and in translation, and then get to 'Beowulf's Boxer Shorts.'

¹ This is a personal misuse of an intransitive verb.

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