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A Choice of
**ANGLO-SAXON
VERSE**

*Selected with an
introduction and a parallel
verse translation by*
RICHARD HAMER

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General Account

Only about 30,000 lines of Old English poetry survive; many of the poems which do are fragmentary, and we know the poets and places and dates of composition of almost none of them. Most of the extant verse is known from manuscripts written in Wessex at the end of the tenth century, though in many cases the poems must have been composed long before in other parts of the country, and much of the copying is demonstrably more or less inaccurate. No major works and few minor ones survive in more than one copy, so that the correction of errors and the reconstruction of the originals is extremely difficult and often quite impossible. The selection of what has survived has depended entirely on the chances which have caused this manuscript rather than that to escape fire and the other hazards of time. Yet despite all these disadvantages we still possess a body of poetry which contains a quantity of work of the highest standard and whose variety is astonishing. Even within the great preponderance of Christian poetry many types are represented, including more or less close translations of parts of the Bible, saints' lives, homilies, prayers and allegories; there are also secular poems dealing with battles and other contemporary events, heroic stories from the past, riddles, charms, proverbs, monologues of a personal nature, and, most famous of all, the great epic *Beowulf*, heroic in manner and matter, yet firmly based in the Christian ethos of the period.

Old English poetry had its origins many centuries before among the Germanic peoples on the continent from whom the Anglo-Saxons were descended, as is made clear by the rather similar types of alliterative verse found among other Germanic peoples, for example in Iceland. We can deduce very little in

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detail about this ancient Germanic poetry. Tacitus tells us of the celebration of their gods in ancient songs, which he describes as their only form of historical record,* and he also states that they sing in praise of Hercules on their way to battle, and that they have another kind of song for inspiring warlike courage.† The first type referred to is probably the direct ancestor of such works as the Icelandic mythical and heroic lays and such Old English poems as *Waldere* (which survives only in two small fragments) and the battle poems. Doubtless from lays of this type the *Beowulf* poet learnt of the historical Scandinavian events which are the setting for his story. It is well-known that even after the conversion English monks still knew and enjoyed the old heroic stories, for in a famous letter Alcuin rebuked them with the question: 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?' (Ingeld was a famous Germanic hero.) One can only guess that these lays were simple in structure, dealing only with one story, hero or battle at a time. There were probably also collections of proverbial wisdom, ancestors of parts of such works as the Icelandic *Hávamál* and the Old English *Gnomic Verses*, and presumably there were verses of a lighter nature.

Apart from something of the form and subject matter of the Germanic songs, the Anglo-Saxons also inherited much of the ethos of the Germanic society as described by Tacitus, as is seen in *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, *The Battle of Maldon* and the entry in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the year 755.‡ But very rapidly after the conversion the Anglo-Saxons adopted with great thoroughness the culture of the Christianity of the time, which had itself extensively absorbed the culture of classical Rome, and therefore we find in Anglo-Saxon literature almost no trace of a primitive, barbarian and heathen past. *Beowulf* is permeated with Christianity, the *Riddles* are no primitive diversion but imitations of a medieval Latin exercise, and if ever the personal elegiac lyric had an independent Germanic existence it had become thoroughly

* Tacitus, *Germania*, II.

† *Ibid.*, III.

‡ G. N. Garmonsway, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Translated with an Introduction*, Everyman's Library, 1953, pp. 46, 48.

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converted for Christian purposes in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

The earliest Old English poem which can be dated with any accuracy is *Cædmon's Hymn*, composed between 657 and 680; the latest is *Durham*, datable between 1104-9. Apart from the *Paris Psalter*, which consists of more than 5000 lines of translations from the Psalms, and the *Metres of Boethius*, which is probably King Alfred's own translation of the verses in *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, the majority of extant Old English verse survives in four great manuscripts, the Exeter Book, the Vercelli Book, the Junius Manuscript in the Bodleian Library, and the manuscript containing *Beowulf* and *Judith* in the British Museum. Junius and Vercelli are collections of Christian material, the Exeter Book, though predominantly religious, is more heterogeneous. The only poets whose names we know are Cædmon, King Alfred, Aldhelm, of whose Old English verse nothing survives, Bede, whose 5-line poem *Bede's Death Song* must have been written in 735, and one Cynewulf, whose practice it was to end his poems with a coda in which his name was spelt out in the letters of the Runic Alphabet, and about whom nothing else is known except that he was probably a Mercian of the eighth or ninth century.

Old English Verse

The Old English verse that survives is remarkably homogeneous in form so that, although we have no contemporary account of the 'rules', they can be deduced with some certainty. The vast majority of lines fit the following description.

Every line is divided into two half-lines containing a minimum of four syllables. Two syllables in each half-line carry a main stress, and at least one of the main stresses in the first half-line must begin with the same consonant sound as the first main stress in the second half-line. But absence of initial consonant counts as a consonant sound, so that two words beginning with a vowel sound can alliterate even if the vowel sound is not the same, e.g. *Battle of Maldon* l. 5, *Offan* alliterates with *arast*. The second stressed syllable of the second half-line should not enter into the alliterative scheme except in a few cases of 'crossed' alliteration, i.e. when the first stressed syllables of the two half-lines alliterate with each other and the second stressed syllables also do, or in cases of 'transverse' alliteration, when the first stress of the first half-line alliterates with the second of the second half-line and *vice versa*. Long ago E. Sievers demonstrated that the patterns of stresses that appear in the half-line can be reduced to five basic types, though extra syllables and other factors give variety and complexity to each of the five types. They may be exemplified as follows:

- A Strong weak strong weak: *fīrum fōldu* *Cædmon's Hymn* 9.
 B Weak strong weak strong: *on ēad, on āht* *Ruin* 36.
 C Weak strong strong weak: *on līf lēdan* *Dream of Rood* 5.

- D Strong strong weak weak: *bēorn blāndenfeax*
Battle of Brunanburh 45.
 E Strong weak weak strong: *feascraftig fērb* *Seafarer* 26.

The stressed syllables contain a long vowel or end in a consonant, or if not an extra syllable must follow them, which is called 'resolution'; however there is not always resolution in the second half of A and C types:

- A with resolution in first half: *Mētodas mēowlan* *Judith* 261.
 C without resolution in second half: *his gōldgīfan* *Judith* 279.

Syllables extra to the basic pattern may be added in quite large numbers, but they are generally absorbed just before or after the first stress:

- B and *lō pære hilde stōp* *Battle of Maldon* 8.

There are also some lines in which there appears to be only one word which can reasonably carry a main stress, such as *mid pā nōpe* *Whale* 28, *pe pone wiggend* *Judith* 252, *for pām worde* *Dream of Rood* 111, *in pā ēcan* *Seafarer* 120, *of langope* *Wife's Lament* 53.

Recently Professor Pope, while not disputing the general truth of Sievers's theory, has produced a fundamentally different view of Old English versification which has received wide though not universal acceptance.* He argues that the verse was rhythmically regular rather than metrically. There is evidence that in some if not all cases the performance of the poems was accompanied by the harp, which makes it improbable that the verse did not have a regular rhythm; indeed many verse forms lend themselves to regular rhythm in speech even if the poet did not consciously intend it, as for example blank verse. Professor Pope shows that the Old English verses can be made to sound very satisfying if spoken rhythmically in such a way that the timing of the words in the normal verses can be written down according to a musical system of notes and rests, with two bars of two beats each to the half-line. When this is worked out in detail a very large number of Sievers's main stresses prove to fall where one would expect them,

* J. C. Pope, *The Rhythm of Beowulf*, Yale, 1942, revised 1966.

on the first beats of the bars. Such a system can readily accommodate all the variants discussed above and more, whereas theories based more closely on the metrical views of Sievers leave many lines which can only be justified by recourse to a rather improbable complexity.

The discussion so far has referred to the majority of OE half-lines, which may be called 'normal'. There is also a substantial number of much longer lines, usually called 'hypermetric'. Detailed analysis* shows that they were twice the normal length and had as their basis four stresses to the half-line. Such lines tend to slow up the movement of the verse, and when skilfully used can add emphasis in appropriate passages, as in *The Dream of the Rood* ll. 8-10, 59-69, etc., and *The Wanderer* ll. 112-15. Often however they seem merely to be used to give some variety, as in the groups in *Judith*. They almost always appear in groups.

To make the foregoing more clear it is necessary to give some account of the Old English stress system. Within a sentence words which have greater importance for the sense will naturally be spoken with greater emphasis. Therefore, as one would expect, in general nouns, adjectives and most adverbs carry the main stresses, followed in priority by verbs other than auxiliaries; but other parts of speech, such as pronouns, auxiliary verbs and conjunctions, can carry the stress if the sense is such that they would naturally be emphasised.

In Germanic the stress in each word had come to fall on the first syllable, and this remained generally true in Old English. But prefixes on verbs were usually unstressed in OE, as *arisan*, 'arise', and the prefixes *ge-* and *be-* were never stressed on any part of speech. In compound words, such as many Proper Names, the second element bore a somewhat weaker stress, e.g. *hildorinc*, *Býrhtnōþ*. This secondary stress could carry a main stress in the verse, but not always, as *gōldgýsan*, but *féasceafig fírd*. As this shows, one of the many sources of possible variety within the half-line was the presence of an additional but secondary stress.

The alliterative poetry was of course originally oral, composed

* J. C. Pope, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-158.

impromptu by skilled poets called *scopas*, who used well-known material and a highly conventional and formulaic verse form and diction. Literary composition must have begun some years after the conversion of England, though even then the poets must have had oral performance very much in mind. The formulas of the oral period remained useful, and one frequently meets the same half-line in different poems, and sometimes even in the same poem. It must be admitted that at worst the excessive use of well-known formulas can give a rather stilted effect, as perhaps in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, which is a very conventional piece of writing.

The demands of alliteration were met by using large numbers of synonyms for some words, which sometimes took the form of special poetic words such as *haleþ*, 'warrior', sometimes of specially formed compounds such as *gáþfremmend*, 'war-doer' = 'warrior', sometimes by more extended periphrastic expressions such as *haleða hléo*, 'the protector of heroes' = 'the chief', sometimes by metaphorical expressions called 'kennings' such as *hwales épel*, 'the whale's land' = 'the sea'. Attractive though these last are, they are not very original for the most part, and one often meets with the same ones. The demands of the verse form often made it necessary for the poet to repeat himself by referring for example to a warrior twice or more in different ways in quick succession. This can be done very effectively as in *Cædmon's Hymn*, where the large number of ways of saying God are skilfully used to refer to different aspects of His nature, though at its worst it can be clumsy and even absurd.*

Towards the end of the period rhyme was increasingly used as an additional ornament, and in a few poems there appears a tendency to relax the rules outlined above. Yet the verse remained substantially the same throughout the 500 years or so involved. Alliterative verse, though in a modified form, continued to be written and probably composed orally until the fifteenth century. The modifications were the result of adaptation to the changing

* For a valuable account of the diction see H. C. Wyld, 'Diction and Imagery in Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *Essays and Studies*, XL, 1925.

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nature of the language. With the decline of the inflectional endings late in the Old English period, word order became fixed in a form not very different from that of the present day, and more auxiliary verbs and prepositions came to be used. English thus became unsuitable for the rather compressed form of Old English verse, and the verse gradually evolved to longer and more flowing lines to be found at their best in fourteenth-century poems such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Piers Plowman*.

Strangely in all this period only two references to the craft of alliterative verse appear. *Beowulf* ll. 867 ff. reads:

	Hwílum cyninges þegn,
guma gilphlæden,	gidda gemyndig,
se ðe ealfela	ealdgesegena
worn gemunde,	word ððer fand
sððe gebunden;	secg eft ongan
síð Bēowulfes	snyttrum styrian
ond on spēd wrecan	spel gerāde,
wordum wrixlan.	

'Sometimes the king's thane, a man of many stories, mindful of songs, who knew very many of the ancient tales, found different words truly linked together; he afterwards began to proclaim wisely Beowulf's adventure, and to tell the story skilfully, to vary his words.'

This passage gives a clear picture of the *scop* composing impromptu, varying his terms and alliterating correctly. At the other end of the period the poet of 'Sir Gawain' urges on us the antiquity of the alliterative verse, referring to the 'locking of loyal letters':

If 3e wyl lysten þis laye bot on littel quile,
I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde,
with tonge,

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As hit is stad and stoken
In stori stif and stronge,
With lel letteres loken,
In londe so hatz ben longe.

'If you will listen to this lay for just a little while, I shall tell it quickly as I heard it spoken in town, as it is clearly established in firm, strong story, linked together with loyal letters, as has long been done in the land.'