

1 *Social and linguistic setting of alliterative verse in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval England*

The primary goal of this study is to establish and analyze the linguistic properties of early English verse. Verse is not created in a vacuum; a consideration of some non-structural factors that could influence the composition of poetry is important for our understanding of its linguistic dimensions. This chapter presents a brief overview of the social and cultural conditions under which alliterative verse was produced and enjoyed in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval England.

1.1 *The Anglo-Saxon poetic scene*

Verse composition was a foremost outlet of creativity and a cherished form of entertainment, moral edification, and historical record keeping for the Anglo-Saxons. When the Northumbrian priest and chronicler Bede (b. 672/673–d. 735) wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in Latin, the poetic rendition of important themes and events in the vernacular must have already been a highly prestigious undertaking. Bede tells us how Cadmon, an illiterate shepherd, found his inability to sing in company shameful. In a dream a stranger appeared urging him to sing the song of the Creation and he uttered “verses which he had never heard.” He was then taken to the monastery at Whitby where his divine poetic gift was tested and confirmed. He spent the rest of his life as a layman in the monastery, enjoying the fellowship of the abbess and the learned brethren, and composing more religious poetry.

Cadmon’s Hymn, as the original dream song is known (c. 657–680), is the only surviving piece of verse reliably attributed to the shepherd, and its literary value is minimal, yet the account of Cadmon’s miraculous endowment and the early date of the (Northumbrian) poetic specimen are of great historical significance. The story of the hymn and its survival in later versions and in other dialects testify to the existence of a section of society for whom verse was associated with loftier intellectual and spiritual experiences. The poetic skills of

2 1 *Social and linguistic setting*

a *scop*¹ were highly appreciated; crucially, it was not the lettered minority who were exclusively, or even primarily, entrusted with the *creation* of verse, though of course clerics were responsible for the existence of the poetic *records*.

In sociological terms this picture is, of course, overly romanticized. In terms of the value of verse as an evidential basis for the state of the language, however, the speech-based nature of alliterative composition cannot be overstated. Looking more closely into that issue, we can define three important characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon poetic scene which provide the relevant background for the linguistic study of the verse records. These are: (a) the centrality of verse as an artistic and social experience; (b) the coherence and relative constancy of the verse form throughout the period; and (c), the disjunction between the speech-based composition and delivery and the written preservation of the poems.

The story of Cadmon and his hymn is only one recorded episode highlighting the place of the poet in Anglo-Saxon society. Other poems, too, offer glimpses of the presence and prestige of the *scop*, the desirability of the gift of versification, and the value and high status of verse recitation as a form of entertainment. In the famously obscure early lyric *Deor* the eponymous poet describes himself as “dear” to his lord, and his long-time employment as “excellent”:

þæt ic bi me sylfum	secgan wille,
þæt ic hwile wæs	Heodeninga scop,
dryhtne dyre;	me wæs Deor noma.
Ahte ic fela wintra	folgað tilne ²

The poem was presumably composed as a lament for the loss of privilege, land, and favor to another *leoðcraeftig monn* ‘a man skilled in song’; the sad consequences of the rivalry are embedded in a catalogue of possibly well-known stories of comparable worldly troubles. Most importantly, the plaintive

1. While the meanings of ‘singer, poet, minstrel, makar’ for the word *scop* are quite clear from the context in which the word appears in Old English, its etymology is unclear. The appealing connection with the verb *sceppan/scyppan* ‘to shape, to create,’ frequently remarked on by less-careful writers on this topic (for example Alexander 1966/1975: 16), is “fanciful,” according to the OED. The only likely connection of the word is with OHG *scoph*, *scof* ‘poetry, fiction’ (‘commentum’), ‘sport, jest, derision’ (‘ludibrium’), and ON *skop* ‘railing, mocking, scoffing.’

The root *scop* was very productive in Old English. Its adjectival form is *scoplic* ‘poetic, metrical,’ and it forms the compounds *sceop-craeft* ‘the poet’s art, poetry,’ *sceop-gereord* ‘poetic diction, the language of poetry,’ *scop-leoþ* ‘a poetic composition.’ The Latin root *meter* is used with reference to non-vernacular verse: *meter-fers* ‘hexameter verse,’ also *meter-geweorc*, and the gloss for *meter-lic* is *scop-lic* (*The Old English Glosses of MS. Brussels, Royal Library 1650*, 299).

2. ‘I will say that of myself, that I was once a scop of the Heodeningas, dear to my lord; Deor was my name. For many years I had an excellent following/service.’

1.1 Anglo-Saxon poetic scene 3

tone of the short piece allows us to infer that mundane comforts and social prestige were accorded to those who were gifted versifiers. A similar theme appears in the final passage of *Widsith*, a Mercian poem also believed to be of a very early date. In that poem the traveling minstrel singing of heroic exploits is an adroit and sophisticated artist, who is aware of his role as a bestower and guardian of fame. Clearly, the versifiers functioned in a social atmosphere that was both generous and demanding, and their accomplishments were central to the spiritual self-esteem of the members of their circles. The *scops'* high status had to be maintained by artful manipulation of the language; it is therefore also reasonable to suppose that the appreciation of the verbal and auditory exuberance of their creations relied on shared linguistic resources and experiences.

The favorable position of the poet and the centrality of verse correlate well with other aspects of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition that point to its stability. In spite of the often discussed thematic divisions in Old English poetry, the corpus of verse that has survived is marked by common features which attest to a single tradition of versification from the seventh to the eleventh century. Seen as a continuation of the tribal continental habits of verse-making, the history of English verse might begin with a reference to Tacitus' *Germania*, which reports the existence of traditional hymns among the peoples of Germania. Although evidence of poetry in Old English is lacking for nearly a century after the conversion of King Aethelberht I of Kent to Christianity in 597, it is reasonable to assume that the production of verse continued uninterrupted in many communities. Though not monolithic in form, compositions from the earliest to the latest exhibit a remarkable stability of basic metrical and parametrical properties: number of ictus per line and alliteration. This would be unimaginable without the axiom of continuity, and continuity must draw on sustained cultural appeal. Where discontinuity appears, in the form of deviation from earlier verse norms, it is essentially a matter of matching new language forms to a stable metrical template; thus discontinuity is also a revealing metrical and linguistic heuristic for dating of the poems.

The survival and strength of pre-Christian verse, probably in the form of short pieces on pagan and heroic themes throughout Old English, is well established. Along with the Germanic character of the narrative themes in *Widsith* and *Deor*, the continuing interest in recounting heroic events in verse is suggested by the famous *Finnesburh Fragment* in *Beowulf*. Here, Beowulf's victory over Grendel is celebrated with communal song and music and the recitation of heroic lays, and Hroþgar's *scop* regales the mead-benches with the story of Finn's retainers. It is believed that *Waldere*, had it survived in a fuller form than

4 1 *Social and linguistic setting*

the two extant fragments, would be another prime example of heroic poetry.³ Although it allows only glimpses of what might have been a long epic poem, presumably composed during the eighth century, but recorded two centuries later, *Waldere* indicates that *Beowulf* “is not an oddity.”

Like the earliest heroic poems and *Cadmon's Hymn*, subsequent vernacular compositions bear the marks of Germanic verse: the four-stress line bound by alliteration, end-stopped syntax, the cataloguing of royal and divine genealogies. Thus, though the main bulk of the surviving Anglo-Saxon vernacular poetry is on Christian themes, Cadmon is just the first known practitioner, and Bede the first successful popularizer, of a native verse form which survived intact and flourished in a new intellectual medium. Old English alliterative versification as an art form thus spreads over both the mythological heroic themes and the scriptural, devotional, and monastic concerns of the Anglo-Saxons. The result is a wealth of valuable material: even the partial records that we have inherited indicate that the Anglo-Saxons created a body of poetry unparalleled in Europe before the end of the first millennium.⁴ Crucially, the poetic monuments bear out the assumption that throughout the period verse composition was both a “careful imitation of an old tradition and individual selection and inventiveness” (Godden 1992: 509).

The appreciation of poetry and its popular provenance and intellectual prominence in Anglo-Saxon times are topics which are constantly being enriched and elaborated, but they are also assumptions on which there is general scholarly consensus. That is not true of the vexed issues regarding the specific modes of creation and transmission of Old English poetry, on which academic opinions are divided and often bitterly controversial. The debate continues and it would be superfluous to rehash the arguments on either side.⁵ It is, however, relevant to the analytic goals of the study to clarify the reasons for my own approach to the nature of the evidential basis, and that includes some specific assumptions regarding the “orality” of the verse tradition.

The reconstruction of Old English poetry as a genre which has its roots in spontaneous speech-based events has a long and trustworthy history. As noted

3. See Pearsall (1977: 5–6), Godden (1992: 491–492).

4. After 900 Norse poets also combined rhyme and assonance with alliteration in a variety of forms. After 1000, Old Norse alliterative verse became practically confined to Iceland, where it continues to exist.

5. The “oral-formulaic” character of Old English poetry was first propounded by Magoun (1953). The resulting counter-claims and further arguments in favor of this position are covered in Olsen (1986, 1988). For a very judicious presentation of the arguments and a comparison of the “orality” of the vernacular tradition to the Anglo-Latin tradition of versification, see Orchard (1994: 112–125).

1.1 Anglo-Saxon poetic scene 5

above, *Cadmon's Hymn* is considered one of the earliest datable poems in Old English, but the metrical form of the poem is an Anglo-Saxon realization of a shared Germanic lineage of oral poetry. Some of the most important topics and questions about the language of verse depend on the view that the creation of verse was not a precious and rarefied occupation within the cloistered seclusion of the monasteries, but a vigorous, direct, and informed involvement with the ambient language. The poetic records we have inherited are undoubtedly a “learned” product, the handiwork of lettered scribes, or they would not have come down to us. However, the monastic setting of manuscript creation did not preclude secular activities, and the community of monks was neither closed nor entirely spiritual. Young noblemen and lay scholars also lived in the monasteries.⁶ In a very material way some manuscripts themselves bespeak a collective effort in the creation of verse; they often fall short of being coherent texts generated within a single nervous system. Instead, they are likely to be the product of several minds not necessarily working in harmony and towards the same end.⁷ All of this supports the view that the poems reflect language intuitions and faculties that must have been shared by the *scops* and the scribes and their audiences. Even in the instances when a particular piece is provably a close translation of a Latin original, a native speaker's competence and feel for the properties of the vernacular underlies verse production. In that sense, for the linguist, the legitimate editorial worry about authorial versus scribal attribution of a text is not an issue of the same magnitude as for the cultural historian. Scribal and authorial testimony can be subsumed under the same speech-based umbrella as long as we are careful to isolate, wherever possible, obviously odd and uninformed mechanical interventions.

The premise that the poetic monuments we study are speech-based is compatible with the various composition scenarios proposed by literary historians. It is conceivable that some poems or portions of poems were composed on the fly, that some gifted individuals memorized passages and then dictated them to trained scribes, or that some passages or whole pieces were composed and written by the same individual. The “oral” nature and transmission of Old English poetry, as understood here, refers to the internalized phonological patterns common to all speakers of Old English and the realization of these patterns in verse. To the extent that languages exist independently of the writing systems that represent them, all forms of linguistic creativity, whether in prose or in verse,

6. The documentation of these claims for the early centuries of Old English can be found in Pearsall (1977: 20–21).

7. This point is developed fully in Moffat (1992), who also stresses the danger inherent in ignoring the individuality of scribal interventions in favor of a unified notion of “the Anglo-Saxon scribe.”

6 1 *Social and linguistic setting*

are “oral.” It has often been noted that the diction and syntax of the poetic compositions can differ significantly from the contemporary prose, for example, Godden (1992: 494). This is undoubtedly a valid consideration in the overall characterization of the language of Anglo-Saxon verse, but it does not preclude or contradict an interpretation of orality which refers to the matching of the auditory properties of language and verse. Stylized and archaic syntax and creative word-formation are powerful foregrounding components of poetry, yet the norm of the spoken language with respect to phonological patterns has to be observed for the tradition to be understood and continued.⁸

By itself, this permissive definition of orality is not interesting or illuminating. Applied to poetry, however, it acquires a more concrete significance. The obligatory attention to sound repetition and rhythm in poetry enhances the importance of the phonological properties of language; the genre itself mandates sensitivity to linguistic features and patterns which might elude a prose writer’s ear. Listening to verse lines, memorizing them, repeating and altering them are all necessarily auditory experiences, though to different degrees. Placed in its most natural context, that of a pre-literate society, the orality of poetry assumes yet another dimension: poetry was composed for the purpose of recitation; verse was composed to be delivered to and appreciated by *listeners*, not readers. The artistry involved in stringing words together in verse lines was not visual, but auditory. This is equally true of direct improvisation and of deliberate and careful penning of verse. The position taken here is therefore that alliterative verse was orally generated and transmitted, that alliteration served as an important mnemonic in its transmission, and that it is a valuable testimony of the shared linguistic intuitions of the poets and their audience. With this in mind, I will use the label “oral” as a synonym for speech-based composition where the evidence found in a poem reflects accurately the state of the ambient language.⁹

8. The interplay between the norm of the “standard” language and the traditional esthetic canon in poetry which requires foregrounding is discussed in Mukařovsky (1964/1970), from whom I take the concept of foregrounding as a violation of some linguistic norms for maximizing the intensity of communication.

9. This statement skirts the indeterminacy of authorial versus scribal text in Old English. I will return to the relationship between editorial work and alliterative evidence in chapter 3.4. For an eloquent and convincing justification of taking the verse evidence as an adequate source of philological and metrical reconstruction, see Fulk (1992: 6–65).

An interesting parallel to the “orality” of Old English verse is provided by the use of dictation in the production of Old English prose manuscripts, see Bierbaumer (1988) and the references there. Lass (1992a: 103–106) provides a phonologically based discussion of the association between oral delivery, pre-silent reading, and writing in Old English. He suggests that the reading *and* the writing praxis at the time were both essentially oral, and that much of the early writing is “utterance transcription.”

1.1 Anglo-Saxon poetic scene 7

As will be argued throughout this study, the Anglo-Saxon poetic records provide strong support for the thesis that the language found in the poetry is a reliable source for the purposes of historical linguistic reconstruction. With respect to alliteration this position will be further defended in chapter 3. There are, however, aspects of the metrical structure of the classical Anglo-Saxon verse corpus, most notably the equivalence of two light syllables to a heavy one, known as resolution, which cannot be interpreted straightforwardly as grounded in the language. Though the *scops* may have created and recited their poems in the mead-hall, though their poems address a broad spectrum of heroic, courtly, religious, and secular themes which had to reach and impress an understanding audience, there was another side to the process. The recording, copying, and preservation of the compositions occurred within a monastic tradition of literacy, and most likely physically within a monastic environment.¹⁰ In that setting, it would not be surprising to find that certain restrictions on the metrical form do not readily match any of the prosodic structures in the contemporary language—resolution being the prime example of such artificially imposed metrical conditions. Such discrepancies between ambient language and metrical form cannot be sustained without specialized instruction, and it may indeed be the case that some scribes were better trained in the more arcane aspects of the craft than others. If this was so, then resolution (see chapter 2) was a purely metrical phenomenon, unsupported by the linguistic intuitions of the native speaker. This would be a reasonable way of explaining the disappearance of resolution after the Conquest. This is an interesting line of research, but it will not be pursued here since it interacts with alliteration only indirectly. Decisions on what constitutes alliteration and is therefore the core of my database lie outside the metrical and linguistic problems associated with resolution.

This study will refer to evidence found in the entire body of Old English verse. The Old English vernacular poetic heritage is part of the Germanic verse tradition which is commonly described as “strong stress” verse, and whose most distinguishing structural characteristic is the use of alliteration on the first fully stressed syllable in each half-line. The strategy of making alliteration the most central cohesive property of this kind of poetic meter is pervasive. It applies even to compositions such as the metrical translation of *The Meters of Boethius* (c. 897), *The Metrical Psalms of the Paris Psalter* (c. 950–1050?), also translated from Latin, and Ælfric’s alliterative prose (early eleventh century), all of which can otherwise deviate widely from the accepted structural norms. The poetic records comprise a finite corpus of approximately 32,000 lines, written

10. See Blake ([1977] 1979: 18).

8 1 *Social and linguistic setting*

between the second half of the seventh century (*Cadmon's Hymn*, c. 657–680), and the latter part of the eleventh century (*Death of Edward*, 1065, *Durham*, c. 1100).¹¹ In addition to numerous individual editions, the entire corpus is collected and annotated in the six-volume *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (ASPR)*. While arguably in need of replacement,¹² these volumes are still indispensable. All of the poetic records are now also incorporated into the on-line *Dictionary of Old English Corpus in Electronic Form*.¹³

Finally, as a background to the linguistic scene of the Middle English period, some comments on the position and artistic use of the Old English vernacular are in order. In Anglo-Saxon England, in spite of the strength of Latin within the scholastic sphere, Old English was widely used and highly respected as a language of many purposes: not just poetry, but also instruction, preaching, legislation. In versification, the Germanic preoccupation with alliteration, whether completely indigenous, or initially partially borrowed from Celtic, Latin, or both, flourished in the Germanic languages, and especially in Old English, beyond any comparison with adjacent traditions. In Celtic poetry, for example, alliteration was from the earliest times a prominent, but structurally subordinate, principle. The vernacular character of the alliterative tradition, its linguistic grounding, accessibility, and relative popularity guaranteed its dominance over other competing traditions. The famous historian of English poetry George Saintsbury said repeatedly that “Every language has the prosody it deserves”;¹⁴ whatever other absurd and unverifiable associations this statement evokes, it is true of the link between the prosodic cadences of the language and the structural use of alliteration in Old English.

An independent consideration of the properties of Anglo-Latin verse confirms the view that the Germanic type of versification was powerfully ingrained in Anglo-Saxon culture. As documented convincingly by Orchard (1994: 43–54), the direction of the influence on insular verse with respect to alliteration was clearly from Old English to Latin. Orchard shows how the Germanic model

11. The dating of the poems in the corpus here and elsewhere in this study is based on Fulk (1992: 61, 348 ff.). More recently, the dates proposed in Fulk's monumental study were confirmed independently by Russom (2002). On the reasons for classifying *The Death of Edward and Durham* as marking the end of the classical alliterative tradition, see Cable (1991: 52–56).

12. See Scragg (1988). Scragg recognizes the enormous scholarly achievement that the *ASPR* volumes represent, but he also points out that the current generation of Anglo-Saxonists would approach the task differently – an inevitable ageing process even for scholarly works of remarkably long and stable shelf-life. For the linguist the greatest obstacle in using the *ASPR* is the purist decision to forgo editorial insertion of vowel length marking.

13. The *Corpus* was compiled as part of the *Dictionary of Old English* project at the University of Toronto under the editorship of Antonette Healey.

14. See Saintsbury (1923: 404), where the statement is preceded by “I have said that . . .”

1.2 Post-Conquest poetic scene 9

of alliteration was carried over into the compositions of Aldhelm (d. 709), with 73.5 percent of the verses in *Carmen Rhythmicum* showing alliteration. Aldhelm's student Æthilwald continued the trend with consistent alliteration of 63.0 percent to 66.6 percent in his later verse. These figures are more than three times larger than the respective figures resulting from an analysis of a comparable set of Hiberno-Latin octosyllabic poems. The unprecedented high frequency of alliteration in Anglo-Latin verse as compared to continental compositions in Latin is thus another indication of the pervasiveness and linguistic naturalness of alliterative verse composition.

It is quite remarkable that while English verse resisted the onslaught of the undoubtedly equally prestigious Latin verse forms, Irish verse adopted the structural features of the Latin hymns: syllable-counting, rhyming, variety of meters, presumably well before the ninth century. This is how Lehmann (1956/1971: 160–198) concludes his detailed investigation of the possible influences of Latin on the Germanic verse form:

When we review the changes in form which resulted from changes in influence we note either that these pertain to larger segments of form or that they bring to a conclusion changes which had been inherited previously. Nowhere do we find support for assuming that the essential modifications of small segments such as the poetic line are the results of importations.

By “larger segments of form” Lehmann means the superimposition of the long epic form on previously existing narrative material without any additional structural changes. New epic techniques were developed: expanded description of the setting; attention to historical background; fondness of the epic hero for monologues and accounts of earlier feats; yet the original alliterative stress line is kept intact. This importation of “larger segments of form” from Latin and Romance hit Germanic verse in two waves (1956/1971:163, 197): with the epic form in the eighth and the ninth centuries, and with the lyric, in the twelfth century. But the essential structural components of alliterative verse remained unchanged.

1.2 The post-Conquest poetic scene

The 1065 poem *The Death of Edward* is the last composition which can be described reasonably as belonging to the classical metrical tradition of Anglo-Saxon versification. Very revealing in this respect are the metrical statistics presented in Cable (1991: 54–55). His scansion shows one single unmetrical verse in the 68 verses of *The Death of Edward*, while on the other side of the

10 1 *Social and linguistic setting*

chronological divide the next extant poem with prominent alliteration, *Durham*, composed *c.* 1100, shows a very high level of unmetricity. In *Durham*, 38.1 percent of the forty-two verses fail to conform to the classical rules. Thus, while the cataclysmic effect of the Norman Conquest of 1066 with respect to changes affecting the phonology and morphosyntax of English can be questioned, the demarcation line in terms of versification modes seems clear. Powerful dramatic images have been conjured up to describe the demise of the Germanic tradition: for the literary historian “it dies choking on its own magnificence” (Pearsall 1977: 85), allowing the foreign models to fill the vacuum. For the historical linguist it “strangles itself” because of the clash between the prosodies permitted or required by an outdated poetic canon and the impossibility of such rhythms in contemporary speech (Lehmann 1956/1971: 202).

To what extent was this violent death inflicted by the new demographics and the shift of political power? Did the new cultural conditions affect the rate of production and the prestige of poetry as an art form? What is the connection, if any, between the Old English tradition and the reappearance of tightly structured alliterative verse of considerable artistic value in the fourteenth century? Finally, were the continuation and reinvention of strong-stress alliterative poetry hampered by changes in the native linguistic scene? Such issues regarding the setting and provenance of the Middle English material on which this study draws define the assumptions behind the empirical base and its formal characteristics. Therefore, before we look further into the metrical and linguistic formative elements of the post-Conquest poetic heritage, we need to set the discussion in the context of the social and linguistic circumstances for the creation of alliterative verse in Middle English.

Demographically, prior to the Norman Conquest of 1066 England was quite homogeneous: the majority of the population spoke some form of Germanic: Old English or Old Norse, and Celtic speakers made up a minority whose cultural presence is mostly inferential.¹⁵ As outlined above, the creation of vernacular poetry in Anglo-Saxon England was a communal linguistic undertaking.

15. The influence of Celtic verse models on English is doubtful. Saintsbury (1923: 24–25) mentions briefly the possibility of influence on English poetry from Irish and Welsh poetry, but he prudently abstains from concrete claims about borrowing from Celtic of specific elements of the verse line. While the shared historical background undoubtedly accounts for the use of Celtic sources in compositions such as *Lagamon's Brut*, the extent of the formal similarities between post-Conquest English verse and Celtic verse is limited to internal rhyming and intricate stanza arrangement. Awareness that the same features of verse could have been borrowed from French or Latin, however, leads Saintsbury (1923: 24, fn) to the statement that “. . . the Englishman of 1200 was certain to get his notions of rhyme from Latin or French, not from Irish or Welsh.”

Another argument which suggests that the English and the Celtic verse traditions must have developed largely independently comes from the fact that the Celts were extremely flexible