

CHAPTER I

Beowulf and Verse History

Since the poem first came to scholarly attention in the early nineteenth century, it has been conventional to regard *Beowulf* as the apotheosis of the so-called classical alliterative long line. Every theory of Old English meter has been measured by the measures of *Beowulf*. But the date of *Beowulf* and the contours of alliterative verse history before roughly 950 are interdependent reconstructions. Is *Beowulf* metrically old or metrically conservative? And how old or conservative? The meter of *Beowulf* cannot be contextualized without first inquiring into the development of alliterative meter in the unreliably documented earlier period. Metrists have sidestepped the problem either by assuming an early date for *Beowulf*, which is circular, or by subsuming verse history in language history, which is a category mistake.

This chapter reviews some metrical tests thought to establish a very early date (before *c.* 750) for the composition of *Beowulf*. The first section charts the evolution of the alliterative meter, 950–1100, and adduces new evidence of synchronic metrical variety in this misunderstood period. The second section argues that previous studies have discovered a metrically old *Beowulf* only by reducing verse history to language history *a priori*. The dynamism of alliterative meter, demonstrable after 950 and presumable before 950, problematizes the methods by which metrists have sought to locate *Beowulf* in the early eighth century. A third section reviews and challenges four non-metrical arguments for a very early *Beowulf*. Together, the three sections demonstrate a key conclusion of the book as a whole: metrical form has a history of its own, which cannot be reduced to cultural, linguistic, political, or textual history. To the extent that verse history registers events in these other historical series – whether the circulation of legends, the loss of inflectional vowels, the conquest of a political territory, or the transcription of an exemplar – it does so through the medium of its own logic.

24

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The Evolution of Alliterative Meter, 950–1100

Before evaluating the methods by which metrists have sought to reconstruct the shape of alliterative verse history before 950, it will be useful to trace the development of the alliterative meter after 950. Here I coordinate two synchronic systems of notation, one designed to describe the *Beowulf* meter and the other to describe the meter of Lawman’s *Brut* (c. 1200), in order to reveal the metrical regularity and historical dynamism of late Old English poetry. This newly precise description of alliterative verse history, 950–1100, aids in two essential tasks. First, it substantially revises received understandings of metrical form in the period. I show how scholars’ impression of a decadent late Old English meter results from an insufficiently diachronic perspective onto the alliterative metrical system. Second, the knowable history of post-950 alliterative verse acts as the best available control on inferences about the texture of verse history before 950. The next section brings both considerations to bear on the question of dating *Beowulf* on metrical grounds.

A richer historical perspective onto late Old English meter has been made newly possible by advances in the study of the *Beowulf* meter and the *Brut* meter. Nicolay Yakovlev, the author of a fundamental study of alliterative meter (still unpublished), discloses a new theoretical paradigm for Old English meter. Yakovlev dispenses with alliteration, secondary stress, feet, word boundaries, and the restriction to two metrical stresses and defines the half-line as a sequence of four metrical positions, either lifts or dips. By definition, no two dips can be adjacent, for in that case they would merge into a single dip. Where most previous commentators described Old English meter as accentual, i.e., based on the stress of individual words, Yakovlev describes it as morphological, i.e., based on the category membership of individual morphemes regardless of their position within the word. Eduard Sievers’s Five Types are replaced with eight permutations of lifts and dips in a frame of four positions:

OE (Sievers)		OE (Yakovlev)
A	=	Sx(x . . .)Sx
B	=	x(x . . .)SxS
C	=	x(x . . .)SSx
A/D	=	SSSx
D/E	=	SSxS
A/E	=	Sx(x . . .)SS
B/C	=	x(x . . .)SSS
A/D/E	=	SSSS

To the basic four-position structure Yakovlev adds three more metrical principles: resolution and its suspension; prohibition of long dips in the third and fourth positions; and the ‘prefix license,’ whereby verbal prefixes and the negative particle *ne* may optionally be omitted from the metrical count. Each of these principles adds a minor complication to the way that Old English meter maps language onto metrical positions. Resolution and the prohibition against third- and fourth-position long dips already appeared in many prior theories of Old English meter; both are discussed in the Introduction. The prefix license represents Yakovlev’s original synthesis of diverse conclusions in previous scholarship. Many of these earlier discussions concerned ‘anacrusis,’ which referred to an extrametrical syllable before the a-verse. By offering the prefix license as a general principle of Old English meter, Yakovlev effectively reduces ‘anacrusis’ to the status of a special case.

Yakovlev’s morphological theory of Old English meter explains many mysteries, including why Type A is the commonest contour (it occurs in the most permutations); why it is impossible to tell whether verses like *wyrd oft neredð* belong to Type A or to Type D (both are SSSx) or whether verses like *flod blode weol* belong to Type D or to Type E (both are SSxS); why metrical resolution occurs indifferently under, and is suspended indifferently after, ‘primary,’ ‘secondary,’ and ‘tertiary’ stress (there is no metrical significance to these varieties of linguistic stress); why curiosities such as resolution, clashing stress, and the optional expansion of dips are permitted in the first place (the meter counts positions, not accentual rhythms); and why prefixes may count or not count in the meter (metrical value – stressed, unstressed, or omitted – is assigned morpheme by morpheme, not word by word or foot by foot). At last, the Five Types can be understood as “the epiphenomenal results of a simpler paradigm.”¹ The occurrence of ‘secondary stress’ in Sievers Types C, D, and E follows from the structure of Old English words, but the metrical principles operate at a deeper level of abstraction. In the prominence it accords to the concept of ‘metrical position,’ Yakovlev’s theory draws on a long tradition of prosodic scholarship, stretching from Sievers to Thomas Cable; but the proposition that Old English meter was morphological, not accentual, is as original as it is clarifying.

Yakovlev’s generalization that Old English meter was morphological is both descriptively adequate and theoretically illuminating, but it does remain a generalization about a meter with at least three recognizable principles of organization: morphological, quantitative, and accentual. The Introduction summarized the importance of quantity in Old

English meter: in this meter, the difference between a quantitatively long syllable and a quantitatively short syllable is metrically significant in the case of stressed syllables. Old English verse also shows a minor impulse toward accentual meter alongside the major impulse toward morphological-quantitative meter. The occasional metrical promotion of function words in order to make up the requisite four positions, e.g., *Beowulf* 22a *þæt hyne on jlde*, is one expression of an incipient accentual meter.² Moreover, the morphological and accentual principles overlap in determining which words are eligible for metrical stress, since both principles can rely on the same hierarchy of grammatical class membership, in which content words outrank function words. The remainder of this section, along with Chapter 3, describes the formal processes by which a morphological-quantitative metrical system with minor accentual features developed into an accentual-quantitative metrical system with remnants of morphological organization. Chapters 4 and 6 move this narrative forward to the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, when alliterative meter left quantity behind in the process of becoming more accentual. Thus the accentual principle represents a form of continuity in alliterative verse history, albeit one expressed much more forcefully in the second half of that history. For now, it is important to note that the evolution of metrical modalities in the alliterative tradition was more fluid than a single label (‘accentual,’ ‘morphological,’ or ‘quantitative’) can convey. Keeping this caveat in mind, the labels remain useful as schematic representations of long-term trends in versification.

Yakovlev’s decoupling of Old English metrical form from Old English linguistic form enables him to trace a developmental arc from the *Beowulf* meter to the *Brut* meter (and beyond: see Chs. 3 and 4). This accomplishment, too, had been unthinkable in previous statements of meter. Yakovlev finds five metrical patterns in the b-verses of the *Brut*, which are strongly reminiscent of the Old English patterns (p)Sx(x . . .)Sx, x(x . . .)SxS, and x(x . . .)S(p)Sx (Types A, B, and C in Sieversian notation), where ‘p’ marks a verbal prefix or negative particle omitted by the prefix license:

OE (Yakovlev/Sievers)		EME (Yakovlev)
pSx(x . . .)Sx (A)	=	xSx . . . xSx (1)
x(x . . .)SpSx (C)	=	x . . . xSxSx (2)
Sx(x . . .)Sx (A)	=	Sx . . . xSx (3)
x(x . . .)SxS (B)	=	x . . . xSxS (4)
x(x . . .)SSx (C)	=	x . . . xSSx (5)

The innovative five-position pattern $x \dots xSxSx$ (Yakovlev Type 2) could also have arisen by ignoring metrical resolution in the Old English patterns $x(x \dots)SrSx$ and $x(x \dots)SxSr$ (Types B and C), where ‘Sr’ marks a lift under resolution. Around 65 percent of Lawman’s a-verses take one of the five forms, as well, but the others are bound by few principles. Therefore, the following discussion focuses on b-verses.

Once connected with a morphological Old English meter, Lawman’s meter reveals processes of selection in alliterative verse history. The two-lift Old English patterns $((p)S(x \dots)xSx$, $x(x \dots)SxS$, and $x(x \dots)S(p)Sx$; Sievers Types A, B, and C without ‘secondary stress’) are precisely the ones used by Lawman in the b-verse, with expansion of one expandable dip (Types 1–5). The decline of clashing stress in alliterative meter, long remarked upon by metrists, turns out to be a red herring. It was not clashing stress *per se* that was deselected from alliterative meter after 950, but b-verses with three or four lifts. The only logically possible four-position pattern with exactly two clashing stresses ($x(x \dots)SSx$, Sievers Type C) survived in the b-verses of Middle English alliterative poetry as Type 5. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Type 5 appears as a vestige of a morphological meter in a metrical system that had long since become accentual. Metrical vestige as a “historical residue” constitutes another of Yakovlev’s contributions to the conceptual vocabulary of early English metrics. “Given the rare opportunity to observe a cross-section in the history of a poetic tradition,” writes Yakovlev, “we always see ‘a work in progress’; the picture observed will always be inherently dynamic.”³ In building upon Yakovlev’s evolutionary model throughout this book, I seek to lend further specificity to the perception of an “inherently dynamic” configuration of metrical patterns in each phase of alliterative verse history.

A second newly visible “historical residue” is the appearance in post-950 alliterative verse of half-lines with three lifts and more than four metrical positions. In addition to the five two-lift patterns, Yakovlev finds that Lawman also composed three-lift verses constrained only by the avoidance of final long dips (as in all Old English patterns) and a minimum (but no longer a maximum) of four positions. Three-lift patterns occur commonly as a-verses and rarely as b-verses in the *Brut*. For the first time in the study of alliterative meter, three-lift verses in late Old English, Early Middle English, and Middle English alliterative verse can be explained as vestiges of a metrical system that counted positions rather than accentual stresses. Middle English metrists have always debated whether verses with three content words, e.g., *Gawain* 2a *þe borȝ brittened ond brent*, should be scanned with two or three lifts. The proponents of two-lift scansion have

made their arguments on a more or less synchronic basis, occasionally gesturing toward two-lift theories of Old English meter. Yakovlev settles the debate in favor of a three-lift scansion by engaging a historical perspective on the problem. He presents a non-beat-counting Old English meter and a non-beat-counting Middle English a-verse meter, but unlike proponents of a two-lift norm he also directly connects these two systems, and Lawman's meter, in one centuries-long *catena* of metrical practice.

In what follows, I test Yakovlev's metrical model on several late Old English poems not considered by him. By triangulating between the two moments in verse history represented by *Beowulf* and the *Brut*, it becomes possible to bring into focus the development of the alliterative meter after 950. Poems from this period include many datable compositions from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, not all of which have always been recognized as poems. Consider the b-verses of the *Chastity of St. Margaret* (1070–71), accompanied by Sievers and Yakovlev scansions jointly (quoted from Appendix A, no. 6):

- | | | | | | | | |
|---|----------|---------|------|----------|-----|-------|---------|
| | x | x | x | S | S | x | |
| | ac | he | ond | his | men | ealle | (5) |
| | x | x | x | S | x | S | |
| | ond | eac | heo | sylf | wið | soc | (4) |
| | S | x | S | x | | | |
| | habban | wolde | | | | | (A) |
| | x | S | x | S | x | | |
| | geunna | wolde | | | | | (xSxSx) |
| | S | x | x | S | x | | |
| 5 | mihtigan | drihtne | | | | | (3) |
| | x | x | x | Sx | S | x | |
| | on | þisan | life | sceortan | | | (2) |
| | S | x | S | x | | | |
| | cweman | mihte. | | | | | (A) |

Chastity, composed more than 100 years before the *Brut*, partakes of aspects of both synchronic systems represented by Sievers's and Yakovlev's metrical typologies. The lines characterized here as Types 3, 4, and 5 could be described, respectively, as the Old English patterns Sx(x . . .)Sx, x(x . . .)SxS, and x(x . . .)SSx (Sievers Types A, B, and C). But the tendency toward the two-lift, one-long-dip b-verse is already taking hold. The verbal prefix *ge-* in

4b may be omitted from the metrical count, as in earlier Old English verse (for Sievers Type A), or included in the count, as in later alliterative verse. The five-position pattern with no long dip (xSxSx) is particularly symptomatic of ongoing metrical evolution: this pattern had been unmetrical in the *Beowulf* meter (because it has five positions) and would become unmetrical again by the time of the *Brut* (because it lacks a long dip). The pattern xSxSx, which bears a certain similarity to the French-, Italian-, and Latin-influenced deductive English meters that had yet to be invented in the 1070s, was a pattern of avoidance in the b-verse for most of alliterative verse history. For a relatively short period, however, it was one way of resolving the conflicting demands of the outgoing four-position principle and the incoming lift-and-dip system.

Compare the first ten b-verses of the earlier *Death of Alfred* (1036–45) (quoted and numbered from *ASPR* 6):

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------|------------------|
| | x x x x S S x | |
| | and hine on hæft sette | (5) |
| | x x x S x(x) p S | |
| | and sume mislice ofsloh | (4) ⁴ |
| | x x S x(x)p S x | |
| | sume hreowlice acwealde | (2) |
| | Sr x x S x | |
| | sume hi man blende | (3) |
| | x x S S x | |
| 10 | sume hættode | (5) |
| | x S x x x S x | |
| | gedon on þison earde | (1) |
| | x x S S x | |
| | and her frið namon | (5) |
| | x x S x Sr | |
| | to ðan leofan gode | (4) |
| | S x x S x | |
| | bliðe mid Criste | (3) |
| | x S x x x S x | |
| 15 | swa earmlice acwealde. | (1) ⁵ |

The metrical system evident in *Alfred* is very similar to that in the *Brut*. Expansion of exactly one dip has become obligatory. The desuetude of the four-position principle, coupled with the reinterpretation of verses with formerly omissible prefixes in anacrusis (11b), has caused the Old

The formal trajectory running from the *Beowulf* meter to the *Brut* meter belies the perception of decline and decay after 950. All of the “defective verses” that R. D. Fulk identifies in *Durham* (1104–1109) are metrical when viewed from the diachronic perspective developed in this chapter, e.g.:

- 4a S S_x S x
ea yðum stronge (three lifts)
- 7b S x S Sr x
wilda deor monige (three lifts)
x x x x Sx S
- 9a Is in ðere byri eac (4)
- 20a x x x S x p S x
ðær monia wundrum gewurðað.⁶ (2)

The “anomalous” anacrusis that Fulk notes in the *Battle of Maldon* (c. 991) and the “[e]xtraordinary anacrusis” he discerns in *Durham* are also characteristic of the emergent system, e.g.:

- Maldon* 32b x Sr x x S x
mid gafole forgyldon (1)
- Maldon* 66b x S x x S x
to lang hit him þuhte. (1)
- Durham* 5b x S x x S x
on floda gemonge.⁷ (1)

Occasional lack of metrical resolution of short, stressed syllables (as in *Durham* 9a *by-* in *byri* 'town') is one predictable result of the destabilization of resolution and the four-position principle. The acceptability of Type 2 (*Durham* 20a) is another.

The metrical developments surveyed thus far mark the disintegration of a set of interdependent structures typified by the *Beowulf* meter: the four-

position principle, metrical resolution, the prefix license, and a morphological basis for metrical stress. Yet the same metrical developments also herald the incipient normative force of a new set of interdependent structures typified by the *Brut* meter: exactly two lifts in the b-verse, exactly one long dip in the b-verse, decreasing symmetry of a-verse and b-verse patterns (Ch. 3), and an accentual basis for metrical stress. The second point is the crucial one missed by all commentators before Yakovlev. Hence the standard judgment that late Old English and Early Middle English alliterative meter is ‘irregular.’ We are now equipped to say that the net change in regularity from Old English to late Old English to Early Middle English alliterative meter was effectively zero: to the extent that one synchronically coherent configuration of metrical norms began to be effaced, a new configuration began to take shape. The meter of *Maldon* and *Durham* is only “defective,” “extraordinary,” or “anomalous” from the perspective of a typologically earlier moment in verse history.

The formal differences between undated and late Old English poetry reflect ongoing metrical evolution. More precisely, the observable evolution of the alliterative meter after 950 implies the unobservable evolution of the alliterative meter before 950. It is only the organization of Old English metrics around *Beowulf* at one end and the Norman Conquest of England (1066) at the other that creates a monolithic ‘classical’ line in the first place. The long metrical evolution narrated in this book offers a counterweight to the prioritization of the *Beowulf* meter in Old English metrics. Like the *Beowulf* poet, late Old English poets practiced metrical styles in use at the time. And like the *Beowulf* poet, they were successful. In the late tenth and eleventh centuries, more innovative metrical styles included more long dips, less metrical resolution, and innovative metrical patterns, not because poets were losing touch with a static tradition, but because they were engaged in a dynamic one.

To summarize the arguments of this section thus far: an improvement in understanding of the *Beowulf* meter and the *Brut* meter ensures an improvement in understanding of late Old English meter and alliterative verse history from Old to Early Middle English. We can go further. These four schemes – the *Beowulf* meter, late Old English meter, the *Brut* meter, and the evolutionary arc that connects them – are best conceptualized as four expressions of the same historical formation, the alliterative tradition. Each of the four schemes gains its fullest historical significance when we are able to observe the way in which it interlocks all three of the others. Correspondingly, in much prior scholarship, isolated and synchronic focus on the *Beowulf* meter, the dim view of late Old English meter, the

perception of irregularity in the *Brut* meter, and the narrative of metrical death and decline after 950 are four facets of the same misapprehension about a poetic tradition. Yakovlev's dynamic theory of Old English and Early Middle English alliterative meter facilitates a new formalization of late Old English meter, presented in this chapter and in Appendix A; this formalization, in turn, confirms Yakovlev's reconstruction and supplies a deeper and broader evidentiary basis for it.

The survival of a number of datably late Old English poems enables us to create new and powerful evidence of metrical evolution and synchronic diversity between 950 and 1100. Figure 1 compares fifteen post-950 poems that are closely datable on non-metrical grounds. *Terminus post quem* (y-axis) is graphed against six purely metrical features that were unmetrical or rare before 950 but gradually became metrical or common after 950 (x-axis).

The six innovative features are, in descending order of weight: (1) more than 90 percent of b-verses with long dip; (2) Type 2 in the b-verse; (3) Type 1 and/or xSxSx in the b-verse; (4) a-verses with non-b-verse patterns; (5) three-lift b-verses with more than four metrical positions; and (6) complete avoidance of metrical resolution and/or lack of resolution of short, stressed syllables as in *Durham* 9a *byri*. In the next section, I contend that the shape of alliterative verse history before 950 remains unknowable in the absence of closely datable poems. Conversely, the date of *Beowulf* and other long poems remains uncertain without a clearer understanding of developments and trends in alliterative composition before 950. Figure 1 represents the history of alliterative verse as instantiated in several closely datable poems over 150 years. It is against this representation that hypotheses about earlier alliterative verse history should be measured.

Verse History and Language History

Old English metrists have devised a variety of comparative tests for Old English poems, most of which suggest that *Beowulf* is especially conservative.⁸ Yet inasmuch as so-called classical Old English meter has been extrapolated from *Beowulf* to begin with, comparative testing risks exaggerating the poem's conservatism or typological primacy. Some tests propose to avoid circularity by correlating metrical history with language history. Such efforts are equivocal, however, for at least three reasons. First, in some cases linguists reconstruct early sound changes from the meter of putatively early poems like *Beowulf*—more *circulus in probando*. Second, in proposing to test a 'text,' ostensibly composed at one time by one poet,