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Introduction

Despite its diverse genres and wide-ranging subject matter, Old English poetry is often seen as a homogeneous body of literature. One critic wrote nearly thirty years ago that 'almost the whole of the poetry, whether fragmentary or complete, heroic or homiletic, popular, learned, or aristocratic, has come down to us in one and the same metre and diction throughout'. This comment sounds as uncontroversial now as it did then, although readers today would expect to see further justification for such a sweeping statement. Unfortunately, critics of previous generations tended to take the 'wholeness' of Old English poetry for granted. Stanley B. Greenfield, for example, does not seem to have considered it necessary to define the syntax and style of Old English poetry before discussing at length how important it is to pay attention to subtle nuances in syntax and style when we interpret Old English poems.² Greenfield did discuss, with Daniel G. Calder, traits of Old English poetry such as vocabulary, diction, formulas, themes, type-scenes and the envelope pattern;3 but these traits are not absolutely indispensable for the poetry: many Old English poems employ vocabulary that is considered to be prosaic;⁴ traditional poetic diction and formulas are scarce in The Metrical Psalms of

¹ C. L. Wrenn, A Study of Old English Literature (London, 1967), p. 36. M. Godden acknowledges diversity in the language of Old English poetry, but provides no systematic treatment of such diversity (see his 'Literary Language').

² S. B. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poetry* (London and Boston, 1972), pp. 109–32.

³ Greenfield and Calder, New Critical History, pp. 122-33.

⁴ Prosaic vocabulary is particularly frequent in *The Judgement Day II*, *The Metres of Boethius*, *The Metrical Psalms* of the Paris Psalter, *Exhortation to Christian Living* and *Solomon and Saturn*. See Stanley, 'Prosaic Vocabulary', pp. 388–92.



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the Paris Psalter;⁵ the theme of the beast of battle occurs no more than fourteen times in eight Old English poems;⁶ the envelope pattern may occur in a substantial number of poems, but its application differs from one text to another.⁷ We must identify more essential features in Old English poetry if we are to treat diverse Old English verse-texts collectively as poetry of 'one and the same' kind.

But recognizing which features are essential to the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons is not easy for us as students of Old English, who have been removed from this poetic tradition for some 900 years. While the Anglo-Saxons could probably *hear* the difference between verse and every-day speech (and perhaps also prose read aloud from writing), we must look for signs of such difference in manuscripts. We have enough evidence to believe that Old English poetry was performed orally, but we know very little about the details of those performances. Bede tells us that Cædmon delivered his religious poems in front of his celestial and earthly audience, but makes no mention of whether the poet sang them with measure, chanted them with melody or just narrated them. We are also told that Cædmon's secular comrades used a harp at the banquet, but we are left to surmise whether the harp accompanied the voice or complemented it to keep a steady measure. While Anglo-Saxon audiences were privy to answers to such questions, we can only surmise from 'deposits of ink on

- ⁵ Griffith, 'Poetic Language', p. 182.
- ⁶ According to M. S. Griffith, 'Convention and Originality in the Old English "Beasts of Battle" Typescene', ASE 22 (1993), 179–99. Earlier, F. P. Magoun, Jr, suggested slightly different numbers (twelve examples in nine poems) in 'The Theme of the Beasts of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Poetry', NM 56 (1955), 81–90.
- ⁷ A. C. Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature 122 (New York, 1935), *passim*, but esp. pp. 9–29.
- ⁸ Historia ecclesiastica IV.24.
- 9 D. W. Frese proposes that comparison of synonyms such as sweg, song and leoð along with their Latin counterparts 'may help us understand more than we presently do about the scop's art'; 'The Scansion of Beowulf: Critical Implications', in Approaches to Beowulfian Scansion, ed. A. Renoir and A. Hernándes, Old English Colloquium Series 1 (Berkeley, CA, 1982), 37–46, at 39.
- Cf. Widsith 103-5; Beowulf 89b-90a and 2107-10. For the Sutton Hoo harp and other issues on music in Anglo-Saxon England, see J. B. Bessinger, 'The Sutton Hoo Harp Replica and Old English Musical Verse', in Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays, ed. R. P. Creed (Providence, RI, 1967), pp. 3-26. See also Pope's theory on the role of the harp in Old English metre (Rhythm, pp. 88-95).



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vellum'. ¹¹ What I hope to do in this book is to search through ink deposits for the performance of Old English poetry, and to transform mute manuscripts into 'visible songs'. ¹²

THE CANON OF OLD ENGLISH POETRY AND THE ANGLO-SAXON POETIC RECORDS

In order to answer the question, 'what is Old English poetry?', we may first ask a more specific question, 'which Old English texts are poems?', in the hope that we might be able to identify common features among such texts. But this approach is not as straightforward as it may appear. Anglo-Saxon scribes did not arrange vernacular verse in prosodical lines or mark the beginnings of prosodical units with capital letters; instead, they wrote all vernacular texts from margin to margin, both verse and prose alike. 13 This puts us in a vicious circle in which we cannot identify the essential features of Old English poetry unless we have first identified poetic texts in the Old English corpus; and yet we cannot identify poetic texts in the corpus unless we have agreed on the criteria of what constitutes poetry. 14 In order to avoid this problem, I propose that we first isolate essential features in the texts that are generally considered poems and then examine texts of doubtful identity to see if they share these essential features. The present book will focus on the first part of the process, namely, the identification of essential features among Old English texts that are agreed to be poems.

For most Anglo-Saxonists, the 'canon' of Old English poetry is synonymous with what is printed in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (ASPR).¹⁵

¹¹ Cable, Alliterative Tradition, p. 134.

For the concept of 'visible song' along with the psychology of Anglo-Saxon scribes working with vernacular exemplars, see O'Keeffe, Visible Song, passim.

¹³ Cf. ibid., passim, but esp. pp. 1-22.

¹⁴ Anglo-Saxons seem to have been able to recognize vernacular verse in manuscripts. For example, the list of books given by Bishop Leofric to Exeter Cathedral describes the Exeter Book as 'one large English book about various things composed in verse' ('.I. mycel englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht'); Anglo-Saxon Charters, ed. A. J. Robertson, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 228–9. The Judgement Day II, an Old English verse translation of Bede's Latin poem De die iudicii, is introduced by the rubric beginning '[i]ncipit versus Bede presbiter [sie]' (ASPR 6, lxx–lxxi); however, versus here might refer to Bede's Latin original.

¹⁵ In the present book, citations from Old English poems are taken from the ASPR editions, unless otherwise noted. Titles may be given in abbreviation based on the lists



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We have had little difficulty identifying poems in the so-called 'poetic codices', edited in the first four volumes of ASPR respectively: the Junius Manuscript, the Vercelli Book, the Exeter Book and the 'Beowulf Manuscript' or 'Nowell Codex'. For example, in the Vercelli Book, where six poems are strewn among twenty-three prose homilies, *Elene* ends in the middle of a folio¹⁶ and is followed immediately by a homily that begins with an anaphoric reference to 'the above-mentioned island'.¹⁷ Despite this incongruity in reference, editors have always recognized *Elene* and the homily as two separate texts, one verse and one prose.

The fifth volume of ASPR contains two texts taken from different manuscripts, *The Metrical Psalms* of the Paris Psalter and *The Metres of Boethius*. These texts are generally considered to have deviated from the norm of 'classical' Old English poetry: both contain large amounts of prosaic vocabulary; ¹⁸ the former is metrically irregular ¹⁹ and seems to demonstrate the conscious avoidance of traditional poetic diction, which, according to one critic, has caused the 'erosion of the system of rank, and the substantial destruction of the formulaic system'; ²⁰ the arrangement of auxiliaries in the latter text is 'entirely different from the tendencies in *Beowulf*'. ²¹ None of these traits, however, has led editors to question the status of these texts as verse.

The sixth volume of ASPR, The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems,²² contains fifty-three poems culled from seventy-two separate manuscripts. Many of these poems had been recognized as verse and edited as such at earlier dates: George Hickes, for example, included The Battle of Finnsburh, The Battle of Brunanburh, The Death of Edgar, Durham, Menologium, Maxims II,

- from B. Mitchell, C. Ball and A. Cameron, 'Short Titles of Old English Texts', ASE 4 (1975), 207–21; and from 'Short Titles of Old English Texts: Addenda and Corrigenda', ASE 8 (1979), 331–3. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
- 16 133v; see C. Sisam, The Vercelli Book, EEMF 19 (Copenhagen, 1976).
- Wæs bær in þam [fore]sprecenan iglande . . .' (Scragg, Vercelli Homilies, p. 383). The island in question is mentioned in an earlier part of the homily, which has been omitted from the abridged version in the Vercelli Book. The longer versions of the homily (that is, an Old English translation of Felix's Vita S. Guthlaci) have been edited by P. Gonser in Das angelsächsische Prosa-leben des heiligen Guthlac, Anglistische Forschungen 27 (Heidelberg, 1909).
- ¹⁸ Stanley, 'Prosaic Vocabulary', pp. 387 and 390.
- ²⁰ Griffith, 'Poetic Language', p. 182.
 ²¹ Donoghue, 'Word Order', p. 191.
- ²² The editor, E. V. K. Dobbie, explains that the term 'minor' 'seems the most convenient one available, although a number of the poems, notably *The Battle of Maldon* and *Solomon and Saturn*, are not "minor" in the ordinary sense of that word' (p. v).



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The Gloria I and Cædmon's Hymn in his Thesaurus, one of the earliest editions of Old English texts.²³ In contrast, The Metrical Preface to the Pastoral Care was treated as prose in an edition published as late as 1871; the editor Henry Sweet did append a metrical arrangement of the preface (suggested to him by Skeat) but called it 'curious doggerel' metrically 'little more than dislocated prose'. 24 Dobbie explained that in his edition, 'only those poems have been admitted which are written in the regular alliterative verse'25 and yet included a few poems composed in irregular verse forms. The Judgement Day II, for example, sometimes substitutes rhyme for alliteration, and sometimes uses neither alliteration nor rhyme. Despite the 'many traces of decay', Dobbie concluded that 'the verse types of the older poetry are reproduced with tolerable accuracy' in this text.²⁶ As for Old English charms, Dobbie maintained that 'there are only twelve which are in metrical form or which contain verse passages of sufficient regularity to warrant their inclusion in an edition of Anglo-Saxon poetry'. 27 He thus excluded a charm for loss of cattle, even though it was arranged as verse in an earlier edition. Dobbie also included six poems from The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: The Battle of Brunanburh (937), The Capture of the Five Boroughs (942), The Coronation of Edgar (973), The Death of Edgar (975), The Death of Alfred (1036) and The Death of Edward (1065). He maintained that he was 'following the practice of earlier editors' in including The Death of Alfred, a text with prose portions and rhymes; 28 but he excluded a number of other passages that are edited as verse by Plummer.²⁹ Dobbie's editorial policy seems to be a mixture of convention

G. Hickes, Linguarum veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus Grammatico-criticus et Archaeologicus, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1703-5); repr. Anglistica and Americana 64 (Hildesheim and New York, 1970) I, 178-208. Hickes, however, includes only the first fifty lines of Gloria I and edits Maxims II as part of Menologium.

Sweet, Pastoral Care, pp. 473-4. In the same edition, Sweet also arranged The Metrical Epilogue to the Pastoral Care as prose (pp. 467-9). The epilogue was not edited as verse until 1901 (F. Holthausen, 'Die Gedichte in Ælfreds Übersetzung der Cura Pastoralis', Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen 106 (1901), 346-7). Holthausen was also the first to edit The Metrical Preface to Gregory's Dialogues as verse ('Die alliterierende Vorrede zur altenglischen Übersetzung von Gregors Dialogen', Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen 105 (1900), 367-9).

²⁵ ASPR 6, v. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. lxxi. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. cxxx.

²⁸ Ibid., p. xxxii; cf. R. P. Wülker, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie, 3 vols. (Kassel, 1883) I, 384-5; and W. J. Sedgefield, The Battle of Maldon and Short Poems from the Saxon Chronicle (Boston, 1904), pp. 24-6.

²⁹ The passages which are edited as verse by Plummer but which are not included in ASPR



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and personal inclination, for which the justification goes no further than the brief statement in a footnote that '[i]t is not always easy to draw the line between irregular meter and rhythmical prose'.³⁰

The texts included in ASPR have nevertheless become accepted as canonical Old English poems without questioning of their status. ASPR served as the corpus for Jess B. Bessinger's concordance³¹ and also as the basis for the list of Old English poetic texts for The Dictionary of Old English (DOE).32 Both Bessinger's Concordance and the DOE list of poetic texts have added Instructions for Christians, a poem recorded only in a late twelfth-century manuscript. The first (and only) editor of this poem speculates that it 'may be a copy of a somewhat older original'33 and proposes that the text deserves 'a place in the corpus of the Anglo-Saxon minor poems'. 34 Following Bessinger's Concordance and The Dictionary of Old English, the present study will include Instructions for Christians in the body of Old English 'minor' poems. The DOE list of poetic texts contains nine texts that are included neither in ASPR nor in Bessinger's Concordance. Of these, I shall include two pre-Conquest texts, The Distich, Psalm 17:51 and the inscription on the Sutton Disc Brooch,³⁵ but exclude the other seven, which are recorded in post-Conquest manuscripts alone.³⁶

- 6 are found in annals 959 DE, 975 DE, 979 E, 1011 E, 1057 D, 1067 D, 1075 DE, 1086 E and 1104 E (C. Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892)).
- ³⁰ ASPR 6, xxxiii, n. 1. ³¹ Bessinger, Concordance to the ASPR.
- The Dictionary of Old English (Toronto, 1986–). The DOE project has catalogued Old English poems according to their location in the ASPR editions. For this, see further R. Frank and A. Cameron, A Plan for the Dictionary of Old English (Toronto, 1973).
- Rosier, 'Instructions for Christians', p. 4. He adds, however, that 'the original text, if there was one, must itself have been late, because the number of poor alliterative lines and lines lacking alliteration indicate that the composer was out of touch with the Old English poetic tradition, indeed much farther removed from that tradition than was the poet of *Maldon'* (*ibid.*).

 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 The latter, however, has an irregular prosodical form (two out of its three lines have rhyme instead of alliteration).
- These texts have irregular verse forms, as well. The *DOE* has defined its corpus on the basis of Ker's *Catalogue*, which includes all the Old English texts occurring in manuscripts before 1200. Ker admitted, however, that '[n]o clear line can be drawn between "Old English" and "Early Middle English" (p. xix). *The Grave*, for example, is often considered as an early Middle English poem (the poem occurs in manuscripts from the second half of the twelfth century and from the end of the twelfth or the early thirteenth century); see, for example, T. Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge and Totowa, NJ, 1977), p. 9; cf. Fulk, *A History*, pp. 264–5.



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Hierarchy of verse-likeness

What we know about Old English poetry has not been handed down to us directly from the Anglo-Saxons, who developed and maintained the Old English poetic tradition. Instead, it comes from post-medieval scholars who, several hundred years after the tradition was discontinued, inferred it through a limited number of manuscripts containing Old English. Early scholars of Old English failed to recognize the principles of the poetry. Samuel Johnson confessed in 1755 that 'our ignorance of the laws of their [i.e. Anglo-Saxons'] metre and the quantities of their syllables . . . excludes us from that pleasure which the old bards undoubtedly gave to their contemporaries'. Thomas Tyrwhitt admitted in 1775 that he was 'unable to discover any material distinction of the Saxon poetry from Prose, except a greater pomp of diction, and a more stately kind of march'. Even the fifth edition of Sharon Turner's History of English Poetry in 1828 maintained that Anglo-Saxon poets 'used no rules at all, but adopted the simpler principle of consulting only the natural love of melody'. Today, we know that Old English poetry differs from Old English prose not just in its 'greater pomp of diction' and its 'simpler principle of consulting the natural love of melody'. Nevertheless, we are still unable to draw the exact line between verse and prose or to place ambiguous texts on the right side of the borderline.2

¹ All the citations here are taken from D. G. Calder, 'The Study of Style in Old English Poetry: a Historical Introduction', in *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, ed. D. G. Calder (Berkeley, CA, 1979), pp. 1–65, at 5–9.

² Cf. Godden, 'Literary Language', p. 491.



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McINTOSH'S STYLISTIC GENRES OF OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

The question of prosaic verse and poetic prose is discussed extensively by Angus McIntosh in his classic article 'Wulfstan's Prose'. McIntosh divided late Old English literature into five stylistic genres, 'between which there are important and significant rhythmical distinctions': the first stylistic genre is the classical verse; the second is the late debased verse; the third is the style used by Ælfric in part of his Lives of Saints; the fourth is the style used by Wulfstan, most notably in his Sermo Lupi ad Anglos; and the fifth is the style of ordinary prose.³ McIntosh preferred to avoid the question of '[h]ow many of these five are "verse" and how many are "prose" and called such an attempt merely a 'terminological problem'. 4 McIntosh's first stylistic genre, the classical verse, corresponds roughly with the 'canonical' Old English poetry of ASPR, which ranges chronologically from the late seventh-century Hymn of Cædmon to the twelfth-century poem Durham. Despite the time span of four centuries, McIntosh argued, all the texts composed in this style obey the same rules.⁵ McIntosh's second stylistic genre, the debased verse, is a minor genre with only two examples: the description of the death of the atheling Alfred from the annal for 1036 in manuscripts C and D of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which is the version used for The Death of Alfred in ASPR;6 and the description of the death of King Edgar from the annal for 975 in manuscripts D and E of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which differs from the version used for The Death of Edgar in ASPR.7 McIntosh's third, fourth and fifth stylistic genres (that is, Ælfric, Wulfstan and ordinary prose) are not included in ASPR. It is clear that McIntosh's five stylistic genres are arranged from the most verse-like (the classical verse) to the least verse-like (ordinary prose). I shall use this hierarchy of verse-likeness to consider the essential features of Old English poetry.

McIntosh's ordinary prose, the least verse-like of his stylistic genres, is a convenient label under which he was able to lump together texts with

³ McIntosh, 'Wulfstan's Prose', pp. 110–12. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵ McIntosh, however, left the definitions of these 'rules' to individual scholars, who may follow 'Sievers or Heusler or Pope' (*ibid.*).

⁶ ASPR 6, 24-5.

⁷ This 'debased' version has much more irregular metre than does the 'classical' version (in manuscripts A, B and C of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), on which ASPR's *The Death of Edgar* (6, 22–4) is based.



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none of the rhythmical devices found in the other four genres.⁸ We should, however, remember that some early Old English prose seems to have been influenced by 'the old-established art of verse'.⁹ Consider, for example, Alfred's translation of Gregory's *Regula pastoralis*:

Donne we smirewað ure heortan eage mid sealfe þæt we mægen ðy bet gesion, ðonne we mid ðæm læcedome godra weorca gefultumað urum ongiete ðæt hit bið ascireped to ongietonne ða birhtu ðæs soðan leohtes.¹⁰

This passage of ordinary prose could be re-arranged in long lines comparable to verse:

Donne we smirewað
ure heortan eage mid sealfe
þæt we mægen ðy bet gesion,
ðonne we mid ðæm læcedome godra weorca
gefultumað urum ongiete
ðæt hit bið ascireped to ongietonne
ða birhtu ðæs soðan leohtes.

According to this lineation, most 'half-lines' conform to Sievers's five metrical types. For example, '4b' godra weorca and '2b' eage mid sealfe are regular A types; '3b' by bet gesion and '7a' ba birhtu bas are regular B types; '1b' Donne we smirewab and '6a' bat hit bib ascireped are equivalents of Sievers's Type A3 (or Bliss's light verse Type a), which have a strong tendency to occur, as they do here, in the initial positions of clauses; 11 the only 'metrical anomaly' in this passage is '4a' bonne we mid bas læcedome, which is Type A with a five-syllable 'anacrusis'. 12 Syntactically, this passage is also comparable to verse. Most syntactic boundaries here correspond to those of the 'half-line' divisions; 13 the only exception is

⁸ 'Wulfstan's Prose', p. 112.
⁹ Campbell, 'Verse Influences', p. 94.

¹⁰ 'We anoint the eyes of our heart with salve so that we may see better, as we aid our perception with the medicine of good deeds, so that it is made acute for perceiving the brightness of true light' (Sweet, *Pastoral Care*, p. 68).

¹¹ Cf. Stanley, 'Some Observations', p. 146; but see Grinda, 'Pigeonholing', p. 313.

A minor 'metrical anomaly' is '1b', whose metrical type (Bliss's Type a1c) never occurs in the second half-lines in *Beowulf* (Bliss, *Metre*, p. 123). We do not know, however, how strictly this constraint is observed in other Old English poems.

¹³ It is 'an accepted commonplace' that 'there is in OE poetry a tendency for the smaller syntactical units to occupy a line or half-line and so to coincide with the metrical units' (OES, § 3959).



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'line 7', where the demonstrative adjective ðæs is separated from the rest of the noun phrase socian leohtes by a 'caesura'. 14 In addition, none of the clauses in this passage conforms to the three basic clause types, which are called by Alistair Campbell 'the foundation of the prose of all Germanic nations':15 the common order, subject + verb (SV), for the principal clause, the subordinate order, subject . . . + verb (S . . . V), for the subordinate clause and the demonstrative order, verb + subject (VS), for the demonstrative clause. This passage begins with a demonstrative clause (introduced by *donne*) that does not have the demonstrative order (VS) but the common order (SV); and the rest of it consists of three subordinate clauses, all of which have the common order (SV) instead of the subordinate order (S . . . V). Despite its rhythmical and syntactic similarities to verse, this passage has been, and always will be, considered as ordinary prose. What separates ordinary prose from more verse-like stylistic genres is alliteration. While Old English verse and the compositions of Ælfric and Wulfstan employ regular alliteration, non-alliterative composition is considered 'ordinary', even if it exhibits rhythmical or syntactic traits of verse. We can infer from this that alliteration is more essential than metre or syntax in the hierarchy of verse-likeness.

When McIntosh placed Ælfric over Wulfstan in the hierarchy, he clearly implied that Ælfric's alliterative composition contains an important rhythmical device that Wulfstan's alliterative composition does not. But the question is: which device? In many ways Wulfstan's alliterative composition is more akin to Old English verse than is Ælfric's: McIntosh admitted that in overall length and weight Wulfstan's phrase units are 'much closer to the units of the classical verse than to Ælfric's more rambling half-lines'; A. P. McD. Orchard has recently argued that Wulfstan's formulaic style is closer to the traditional—oral style of verse than is the style of any other prose writer. What keeps Wulfstan's alliterative composition distant from verse is line structure: he uses alliteration only to indicate units comparable to half-lines, which

The extant Old English poetry contains a few examples in which the half-line division falls between the demonstrative adjective and the rest of the noun phrase: e.g. GenA 1541b–2a and PPs 118.127 3.

¹⁵ 'Verse Influences', p. 94. See also Andrew, *Syntax and Style*, pp. 1–2; and B. Mitchell and F. C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 5th ed. (Oxford, 1992), pp. 63–5.

¹⁶ McIntosh, 'Wulfstan's Prose', p. 119.
¹⁷ 'Crying Wolf', pp. 258–9.