On argumentation in Old English philology, with particular reference to the editing and dating of *Beowulf*

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If poststructuralist literary and cultural theory does not pervade Anglo-Saxon literary studies as thoroughly as it does scholarship in later periods, as it has sometimes been said, to a considerable extent the cause is surely the field's dependence on philology. Some see this as cause for regret.[1] It may be, however, that philology is the field's greatest asset. Given the high value that recent literary studies accord textual alterity, Old English texts are of unparalleled worth in the English canon, since they are culturally the most removed. Philology is the set of protocols designed to mediate the cultural difference, making the language accessible and putting texts into a form that modern readers can comprehend. In making Old English studies resistant to the homogenization of critical methods apparent in later periods, philology perhaps represents the respect in which this field has most to offer literary studies at large, embodying a methodology for dealing with texts of a high degree of alterity.

Yet if this is the case, Anglo-Saxonists are ill prepared to explain to others the value of their methodologies, since the methodological bases for philological argumentation are almost nowhere discussed in Anglo-Saxon scholarship. There is, for example, an appreciable amount of contentious debate about whether texts should be edited liberally or conservatively, but there seems to be little explicit discussion, beyond mere assertions of personal preference, of the principles on which an editor might decide whether emendation of a text is necessary. In 1992, I attempted to formalize some of the methodological principles underlying argumentation about the dating of Old English verse, with particular emphasis on the role of probability in such scholarship.[2] Yet this methodological discussion seems to have earned little notice, perhaps because

[1] Seth Lerer, for example, perceives sharp 'reactions against theoretical endeavors' that he attributes to Old English scholarship's 'revived turn towards the empirical and the philological': '*Beowulf* and Contemporary Critical Theory', *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles (Lincoln, NE, 1997), pp. 325–39, at 327.

[2] See R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia, PA, 1992), §§8–23, with the many references there to the treatment of hypotheticism in handbooks of methodology in the social sciences.

these principles are perceived to have small relevance outside of the limited realm of poetic metre. To the contrary, probabilism is the foundation on which the edifice of philological inquiry is constructed, and it is of fundamental importance to all areas of Anglo-Saxon studies that deal with texts in the Old English language. The purpose of the present study is to substantiate that point, demonstrating in the process the extent to which philological argumentation in Old English studies suffers because of neglect of, or mistaken notions about, probability.

One general consideration about probabilism should be noted at the start: the basis for establishing probabilities is statistical, even though statistics are not often cited explicitly in philological scholarship. In the social sciences, of course, probabilities of various kinds are routinely calculated mathematically. Formulae for determining probability are beside the point in the present context: it is rarely necessary to use them in philological argumentation because the kinds of probabilities involved are usually plain enough to be intuited. For example, Janet Bately has ascribed the authorship of the prose psalms in the Paris Psalter to King Alfred on the basis of certain vocabulary choices: *mettrumnes* in preference to *untrumnes*, *unriht* in preference to *unrihtwisnes*, *sceadu* instead of *scua*, and so forth.[3] The preferred words are certainly found in many other texts, as well, but the point is the extraordinary variety of lexical items showing agreement with Alfred's preferences. This argument may not seem to be founded on statistics, but it is a statistical consideration that undergirds its general persuasiveness: the probability of Alfred's authorship rests not on the evidence of this or that word but on the improbability that another author should have shown the same lexical preferences as he in so many different instances. Bately could have quantified this, to make it explicit, by showing the much smaller number of lexical correspondences between the psalms and certain texts known not to have been composed by Alfred. Doubtless she thought this unnecessary (and rightly so) because her unstated assumption is that it should be obvious to all what an extraordinary coincidence such a range of lexical resemblances would be if the work is not Alfred's. Yet if her readers share this assumption it is because of a general statistical consideration: although extreme coincidences do occur, they are so rare that seeming instances of this kind must be regarded as evidence for design rather than happenstance. The larger point to be derived from the example is that even though most philological research similarly does not require explicit quantification to be effective, its persuasiveness nonetheless depends upon statistical considerations that *could* be quantified. As the following examples will demonstrate, this potential for

[3] 'Lexical Evidence for the Authorship of the Prose Psalms in the Paris Psalter', *ASE* 10 (1982), 69–95.

quantification has important methodological implications for philological argumentation in general.

CASE ONE: ON FALSIFIABILITY

Literary hermeneutics, as it is currently practised in England and America, favours plurivocity and multivalence of meaning, valuing the resistance of texts to interpretative closure and insisting on the equal worth of contrasting analyses. The antipathy that has been expressed by some literary scholars toward philology is thus to some degree attributable to philologists' frequent aim of narrowing rather than multiplying explanations.[4] This philological aim is not an individual preference but an inalienable component of the methodology fundamental to much argumentation in the social sciences and in those areas of linguistics allied to them. Under the protocols of hypotheticism, the investigator forms a hypothesis, which cannot ever be proved conclusively, but which can be validated (rendered probable beyond a reasonable doubt) chiefly by two means: by demonstrating its explanatory efficiency (or 'elegance': its internal consistency, its relative simplicity, and the array of facts that it explains) and by showing the inefficiency or improbability of all competing explanations.[5]

Hypotheticism is not the only method of argumentation employed in social science research, and indeed, the model of multiple explanations is in many cases a more apposite approach. For example, sociolinguists know that it would be vain to explain language variation within a speech community as due to a single cause, since many factors are known to produce such variation, including differences of gender, socioeconomic status, age, register, and so forth. It is often impossible to attribute any particular variant linguistic form to a single one of these factors, since all may contribute at once to speech variation. On the other hand, if one were to claim that a particular sociological factor (say, religious belief) was an influence in producing a given linguistic variation, such a claim would necessarily be either true or false – it could not be both at once – and although it could never be proved (as noted above), it could be disproved if appropriate statistical counter-evidence could be adduced. Hence the negative nature of the term applied to such a claim: it is said to be 'falsifiable', a term that implies nothing about whether or not the claim is true, only that it can be tested. Any falsifiable claim inevitably invokes the protocols of hypotheticism, and it is therefore subject to well-known methodological requirements of argumentation. Too often in philological research the connection

[4] Another factor in this development, however, has been a certain anti-philological critical tradition beginning with Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979), who argues that racism underpins nineteenth-century philology as a critical practice.

[5] These and other methodological fundamentals are discussed in Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter*, §§8–23.

between falsifiability and hypotheticism goes unrecognized, with the consequence that competing, falsifiable claims are allowed to stand as matters of polite disagreement, like so many literary questions, when they pertain to questions that are in fact decidable.

The worth of these observations for Anglo-Saxonists can be demonstrated in regard to a current controversy about poetic syntax. It has been argued by a series of distinguished scholars that in verse a syntactic element of a particular sort – noun, adjective, verb, adverbial, or clause – may be intended to be construed twice, with both the preceding and the following material. That is, it is used ἀπὸ κοινοῦ. For example, in regard to the verses *bugon þā tō bence blǣdāgande / fylle gefǣgon* (*Beowulf* 1013–14a), the usual assumption is that *blǣdāgande* is the grammatical subject of either *bugon* or *gefǣgon*, and its referent is understood to be the subject of the other verb, which has no overt grammatical subject.[6] Thus the comma that Klaeber places after *blǣdāgande* might with equal justice have been placed before it. If *blǣdāgande* is understood to be used ἀπὸ κοινοῦ, to the contrary, it is to be regarded as the grammatical subject of both *bugon* and *gefǣgon* at once. Those who construe the word this way would regard either way of punctuating the passage as misleading. Bruce Mitchell in particular, who has written more than anyone on the topic, has argued that no punctuation should be inserted.[7] To punctuate here would be to impose an editor's opinion about an essentially undecidable question of syntax, thus unjustly constraining interpretation. Moreover, in Mitchell's view, to punctuate is not simply to make a choice that cannot be justified but to represent Anglo-Saxon notions of syntax as if they were identical to modern ones. It is his belief that the ambiguity is intentional, an aspect of poetic artistry. E. G. Stanley, by contrast, argues on the basis of metre, element order, the absence of analogues in Modern English, and the clearer nature of examples in Old French, among other concerns, that the examples claimed for Old English are unconvincing.[8] Mitchell responds effectively to these counter-arguments, but in the end the question of the reality of such constructions has not been settled, and Mitchell himself inclines to the view that it is 'all just a matter of opinion'.[9]

[6] Here and throughout (except in reference to the *Electronic 'Beowulf'*: see below), the edition of *Beowulf* cited is that of F. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed., with first and second supplements (Lexington, MA, 1950). For all other verse, the edition cited is ASPR, though macrons have been added.

[7] B. Mitchell, 'The Dangers of Disguise: Old English Texts in Modern Punctuation', *RES* ns 31 (1980), 385–413, repr. in his *On Old English* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 172–202; and esp. *idem*, '*Apo koinu* in Old English Poetry?', *NM* 100 (1999), 477–97, with references there to the literature on the topic.

[8] '*Ἀπὸ κοινοῦ*, Chiefly in *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxonica: Festschrift für Hans Schabram zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. K. R. Grinda and C.-D. Wetzel (Munich, 1993), pp. 181–207.

[9] '*Apo koinu* in Old English Poetry?', p. 478.

Whether ἀπὸ κοινοῦ constructions are accident or artistry may indeed seem an issue that cannot be settled, a matter of individual belief or disbelief. In some cases, however, a certain probability can be established. Mitchell cites an example of the construction from *Christ and Satan* first noted by Herbert Dean Meritt:

eft reordade ōðre sīðe
fēonda aldor wæs þā forht āgēn (75–6)

Here *fēonda aldor* might be taken as the grammatical subject of both *reordade* and *wæs*, as it is certainly the conceptual subject of both. In 76b, however, the alliteration shows that the first stress falls on *forht*, and unstressed *wæs* and *þā* thus represent a violation of Kuhn's first law, the much discussed *Satzpartikelgesetz*, which prescribes that particles like these should be stressed unless they appear in the first drop of the verse clause – which they cannot do if *fēonda aldor* is the grammatical subject of *wæs*.[10] Mitchell's position has the virtue of being consistent, since he has expressed grave doubts about the validity of Kuhn's laws.[11] To be sure, violations of Kuhn's first law are to be found throughout the poetic corpus, as Kuhn himself was careful to point out. Yet to disregard the law altogether or call it simply subjective is to ignore probabilities, because in all but a minuscule fraction of the relevant instances, when the syntax is not ambiguous, stylistically conservative poems conform faithfully to the patterns observed by Kuhn. The general accuracy of Kuhn's observations is thus statistically demonstrable.[12] As a consequence, although it is not impossible that the passage in question should represent one of the infrequent violations of the law, this is considerably less probable than the assumption that *fēonda aldor* is to be construed with the preceding verb. In any case, it would certainly be prejudicial to treat all passages like this one as entirely ambiguous, given that the statistical probability of the law's application dictates that most, if not all, should be regarded as instances in which a reading ἀπὸ κοινοῦ should not be allowed.

Accordingly, if ἀπὸ κοινοῦ constructions are to be regarded as a genuinely relevant feature of Old English verse, there must not be as many instances as

[10] H. Kuhn, 'Zur Wortstellung und -betonung im Altgermanischen', *PBB* 57 (1933), 1–109, repr. with an addendum in his *Kleine Schriften* I (Berlin, 1969), 18–103: 'Die Satzpartikeln stehen in der ersten Senkung des Satzes, in der Proklise entweder zu seinem ersten oder zweiten betonten Worte' (p. 23). For an extensive discussion and bibliography of scholarship on Kuhn's laws, see H. Momma, *The Composition of Old English Poetry*, CSASE 20 (Cambridge, 1997).

[11] Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), §3947.

[12] It may be noted here that in the face of a great many objections levelled in recent years at Kuhn's findings, Daniel Donoghue, 'Language Matters', *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 59–78, at 71–5, has produced an elegant statistical demonstration of the motivational independence of the first law from general Old English syntactic principles.

has been supposed. Yet certainly the considerable majority of proposed instances are indeed entirely ambiguous, in the sense that no convincing probability can be established for or against their validity on the basis of principles, like Kuhn's laws, derived from the poetic texts themselves. Still, other kinds of probabilities can be established, including the argumentative probability to be derived from the principle of burden of proof. If it is the case that a significant probability cannot be established for or against the proposition that *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* constructions are intentional, the question would appear to be reducible to a matter of individual belief or disbelief.[13] In that event it is not a very interesting issue, except to those interested in comparing personal aesthetics. Yet even if it is true that the ambiguity is total in most instances, it is not true that no initial probability attaches to the question. A recurrent concern of Mitchell's is not to prejudice our understanding of Old English verse by imposing modern syntactic categories on texts to which they are foreign. Yet if avoidance of ethnocentrism is of paramount importance, surely it follows that neither should the assumption of *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* constructions be imposed on texts if a reasonable degree of certainty cannot be established that they are intended. Otherwise they may be simply another instance of imposing a modern idea on ancient texts. If one is compelled to decide without further evidence whether the *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* analysis or the usual one is more likely to be a modern imposition, surely one would choose the former, since it is a highly artificial construction, one that is not favoured in natural languages, in which, rather, elements are not normally shared between clauses but may be understood from a preceding clause by the very common syntactic process of the deletion of an identical element. If the *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* construction is indeed less natural and if the issue is reducible to a matter of faith, then the burden of proof does rest with believers rather than nonbelievers. As long as the question remains one of belief or disbelief, the decision must go against believers. Some firmer basis for belief must be established before the proposition may be credited.

If the construction is genuine, a firmer basis should be obtainable, since it should be possible to generate statistical evidence for it, as one should for all falsifiable claims. It is of course very common in Old English verse for the subject of one clause to be understood as the subject of the next, in an asyndetic construction that no one would analyse as usage *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ*, like the following familiar one from *Beowulf*:

Hwīlum hīe gehēton æt *hæ*rgtrafum
wīgweorþunga, wordum bǣdon

[13] Here and throughout, the term 'significant' in connection with probabilities is not used in the technical sense it bears in statistical research, where it usually refers to a likelihood at an upper threshold of five per cent (sometimes 1 or 0.1 per cent) that a given pattern in the data could be the result of chance.

þæt him gāstbona gēoce gefremede
wið þēodþrēaum. (175–178a)

Here *hīe* is the subject of *gehēton*, and it is understood in the next clause as the subject of *bādon*. In a construction like *Beowulf* 1013–1014a cited above (p. 4), *bugon þā tō bence blādāgande / fylle gefāgon*, it is only the placement of *blādāgande* between the two predicates that suggests its dual allegiance. Nonbelievers thus are likely to object that in the latter case it is only the accident of word order that suggests the unusual analysis. Indeed, since word order is variable in Old English verse, and since common asyndetic usage will adequately account for the latter construction without recourse to any other explanation, by Ockam's razor the analysis *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* ought to be rejected, since the construction can be explained adequately by a principle (asyndetic usage) independently motivated on other grounds, without requiring the addition of an unusual grammatical rule new to the syntax of verse.

The only adequate response to this objection is statistical: if constructions with a subject used *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* are genuine, they ought to occur more frequently than one would expect on the basis of the frequency with which subjects occur at the end of a clause in whatever poem one happens to be studying. That is, if such dual constructions are the result of accident rather than design, the *κοινόν* should be positioned where it is simply because of the frequency with which subjects appear at the end of a clause in verse, and that is an assumption that can be tested statistically. Suppose, for example, we found that after eliminating from a given poem all possible *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* constructions with a shared subject there remained 1,000 clauses, of which 100 (ten per cent) were clauses with the subject in final position, and 400 (forty per cent) were clauses without an expressed subject. Suppose further that in 300 (seventy-five per cent) of those 400 clauses, the unexpressed subject was identical to the subject of the preceding clause. We should then expect to find that if the sequence of clause types is random, approximately forty (i.e. forty per cent) of the clauses with the subject in final position would be followed by a clause without an expressed subject, and of those forty, in just thirty (i.e. seventy-five per cent) might an unexpressed subject identical to that of the preceding clause be expected. In that case, the number of *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* constructions in the poem with a shared subject would have to exceed thirty by a reasonably large number if such constructions are not a result of the chance combination of subject-final clauses and clauses with an unexpressed subject identical to that of the preceding clause. Similar tests might be devised for other supposed *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* constructions.[14]

[14] Conceivably, because of syntactic factors not taken into account, the test described here might prove inadequate, but if that turned out to be the case, the example would still demonstrate the reasoning on which an adequate test could be devised.

Whether or not the statistics favour the *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* analysis is for partisans to determine: philological argumentation is an act of persuasion, and hypotheses must accordingly be validated or invalidated by their proponents and opponents. The matter is of no great relevance to the present issue, which is not the validity of the *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* analysis but the recognition that the question can in fact be settled on a statistical basis – indeed, it would amount to a trifling matter of taste if the case were otherwise – and that statistics can indeed be brought to bear on the question. Philological debates of any worth are not irresolvable. When they involve incompatible claims they are subject to the principles of hypotheticism – they are not, like so many literary questions, open to multiple, equally valid interpretations – though their solution does depend upon the compilation of statistical evidence.

Finally on this topic it should be remarked that although this controversy may seem to be of limited significance, confined to a small question of Old English syntax, it does in fact have fairly large implications for an edition of a poem like *Beowulf*. Mitchell's claim is that fidelity to the context in which *Beowulf* was produced and received demands that editors not employ modern habits of punctuation that obscure its genuine syntactic features, the most significant of which in this regard is the *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* construction. If it could be proved that elements construed *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* were an essential feature of the *scop*'s art, this would indeed provide a strong motive for editors to punctuate *Beowulf* in such a way as not to obscure the nature of such constructions – much as Mitchell and Susan Irvine have themselves punctuated the poem.[15] As textual theorists have frequently remarked, the purpose of a critical edition is to mediate the distance between a text and its audience.[16] For Old English texts the obstacles to a full understanding for a modern audience are many, including the unfamiliarity of the language itself, the textual practices that accompany transmission in manuscripts, the oral nature of medieval reading, and the peculiarities of pre-Conquest spelling and punctuation. It is impossible to recover fully the medieval experience of reading or, more likely, hearing a poem like *Beowulf*, and so the editor of a critical edition is compelled to a compromise between fidelity to a poem's historical context and the need to make it comprehensible to modern readers. Mitchell's prescriptions about punctuation thus could never amount to an absolute requirement, given that different editions serve different purposes and different audiences, and given that different editors inevitably choose to compromise the historical context in different ways. But probably most editors would feel, like Mitchell, that the inconvenience for readers of an

[15] B. Mitchell and S. Irvine, *'Beowulf' Repunctuated*, OEN Subsidia 29 (Kalamazoo, MI, 2000); see esp. §§15–23.

[16] For discussion and references, see my 'Inductive Methods in the Textual Criticism of Old English Verse', *Medievalia et Humanistica* ns 23 (1996), 1–24, at 14.

unfamiliar method of punctuation would be outweighed by the degree of literary integrity achieved. It is thus of no small importance whether *ἀπὸ κοινοῦ* constructions are a matter of scholarly disagreement or a falsifiable hypothesis about Old English poetic syntax.[17]

CASE TWO: ON THE PERVASIVENESS OF PROBABILISM

It may seem to some that the present discussion is of little relevance to the bulk of philological scholarship on Old English, which makes no explicit appeal to statistical probabilities. In actuality, it is hardly possible to undertake any sort of philological work without advancing falsifiable claims that involve considerations of probability, which in turn must be based on quantifiable regularities, regardless of whether or not those regularities have actually been quantified. This is true not just of explicitly argumentative scholarship but also of such seemingly non-argumentative work as translation (since meaning is determined on a probabilistic basis) and textual editing. It is impossible to edit a poem like *Beowulf* without implicitly taking a stand on a variety of tangential philological questions, such as the reliability of metrical analysis, the purpose of punctuation in different sorts of editions, and whether the manuscript is a copy or in the author's own hand. Because such questions must be decided beforehand, there is no such thing as an ideologically uncommitted editor. Such are issues, however, that cannot be decided in any rational way without recourse to probabilities. Yet since an editor's stance on matters like these may not be stated explicitly, it may not be clear what role probabilism plays in the construction of an edition.

The publication of Kevin Kiernan's *Electronic 'Beowulf'* offers an occasion for contemplating the role of probability in scholarly editing.[18] Kiernan's stance for more than twenty years has been that the poem is an eleventh-century composition, at least some of it composed by one of the scribes of the *Beowulf* Manuscript.[19] This belief dictates his position on a variety of philological issues. The assumption that the text does not have a lengthy history of scribal

[17] For this reason, at the moment it is not intended to apply punctuation like Mitchell and Irvine's to the fourth edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf*, currently under revision by R. E. Bjork, J. D. Niles, and myself. We expect to employ Modern English punctuation, not as an assertion that Old English syntax was not different, but in recognition that the most relevant hypotheses about syntactic difference have not been validated. In the absence of such validation, the method of punctuation most familiar to the majority of the edition's users seems most serviceable.

[18] Issued as two CDs (London and Ann Arbor, MI, 1999).

[19] K. S. Kiernan, 'The Eleventh-Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript', *The Dating of 'Beowulf'*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1981; repr. 1997 with an afterword by N. Howe), pp. 9–21; *'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1981). The 'revised edition' of the latter (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996) is actually a reprint with two new prefaces and a reprint of a 1983 article.

recopying behind it underlies his contention that editors of the poem emend too freely: seeming errors in the manuscript are usually not errors at all, and thus what is needed is 'a new, truly conservative edition'.[20] This is what he offers alongside electronic images of the manuscript in his *Electronic 'Beowulf'*. Since alliteration and metre frequently seem to contradict the assumption that the manuscript is correct, the former must be regarded as a less stringent requirement than editors have usually supposed and the latter as an unreliable basis for judgement.

The extent of Kiernan's disregard for the findings of metrists is reflected in one of his more striking editorial decisions, the elimination of hypermetric verses from the poem. The three hypermetric passages (1163–8, 1705–7, 2995–6) have been edited so that the verses more closely resemble those of normal length. The last of the three in Klaeber's edition is arranged as follows. Hygelac, we are told, repaid Eofor and Wulf for their defeat of Ongentheow; he

> sealde hiora gehwæðrum hund þūsenda
> landes ond locenra bēaga, – ne ðorfte him ðā lēan oðwītan
> mon on middangearde, syðða[n] hīe ðā mærða geslōgon. (2994–6)

Kiernan converts the two hypermetric lines to three verse pairs, arranging the passage thus:

> Sealde hiora gehwæðrum hund þusenda
> landes 7 locenra beaga, ne ðorfte him ða lean,
> oðwitan mon on middangearde,
> syðða[n] hie [ma] ða mærða geslogon. (2995–8)

The claim implicit in eliminating hypermetric verses is that the very existence of such a form is a matter of faith: some feel there is a need for it, others do not. In actuality, metrical analysis at this level is little more than a system of probabilities derived from simple statistics – no matter what one's system of metrical analysis, some word patterns are common in verse, while others seem to be avoided by the poets – and so when other editors treat such verses as hypermetric, their decision is not an arbitrary one but a response to the probabilities suggested by statistics. The decision may not be free of ideological entanglements, but the ideology involved pertains to the efficacy of probabilistic reasoning rather than to the origins of this particular poem. By contrast, Kiernan's rejection of hypermetric verses is apparently motivated by his belief in the eleventh-century origin of the poem, which demands rejection of the implications of metrical analysis. Thus, regardless of whether or not either approach to editing these verses can be called entirely objective, there is a remarkable difference in the degree of objectivity of the two.

[20] *'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript*, p. 278.