GEOFFREY RUSSOM

The Evolution of Verse Structure in Old and Middle English Poetry

From the Earliest Alliterative Poems to Iambic Pentameter

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THE EVOLUTION OF VERSE STRUCTURE IN OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

In this fascinating study, Geoffrey Russom traces the evolution of the major English poetic traditions by reference to the evolution of the English language, and considers how verse forms are born, how they evolve, and why they die. Using a general theory of poetic form employing universal principles rooted in the human language faculty, Russom argues that certain kinds of poetry tend to arise spontaneously in languages with identifiable characteristics. Language changes may require modification of metrical rules and may eventually lead to extinction of a meter. Russom's theory is applied to explain the development of English meters from the earliest alliterative poems in Old and Middle English and the transition to iambic meter in the Modern English period. This thorough yet accessible study provides detailed analyses of form in key poems, including *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and a glossary of technical terms.

GEOFFREY RUSSOM is Emeritus Professor of English and Medieval Studies at Brown University and Nicholas Brown Professor of Oratory and Belles Lettres, Emeritus. He is the author of *Old English Meter and Linguistic Theory* (Cambridge, 1987) and of *Beowulf and Old Germanic Metre* (Cambridge, 1998), and has published numerous journal articles and book chapters on the theory of poetic form, the history of the English language, and the artistic excellence of preliterate verse.

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For Mike and Sue

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The idea for this book originated in conversations with Ad Putter and Myra Stokes. Their foundational work made it possible for me to think in concrete terms about how alliterative meter evolved from its remote beginnings to the dawn of the modern era. At the "Conference on the Metres of Alliterative Verse," hosted by the University of Bristol in July 2005, I also profited from conversations with J. A. Burrow, Thomas Cable, Hoyt Duggan, and Thorlac Turville-Petre. Preliminary work toward this book has been presented at the Bristol conference, at SHEL conferences in Seattle and Ann Arbor, and at the "Frontiers in Comparative Metrics" conference co-hosted in 2008 by the University of Tallinn and the University of Tartu. At these conferences I obtained useful ideas from many linguists interested in poetic form, including Lev Blumenfeld, Maria-Kristiina Lotman, Mihhail Lotman, Donka Minkova, Gregory Nagy, Seiichi Suzuki, Yasuko Suzuki, Marina Tarlinskaya, Reuven Tsur, and Gilbert Youmans. R. D. Fulk and Leonard Neidorf read a draft of the book and responded with valuable comments on Old English topics. Bruce Hayes and Paul Kiparsky answered questions about aspects of their recent work that turned out to be very helpful. As always, Jacqueline Haring Russom has contributed linguistic and editorial insights. Linda Bree and her team guided me through the intricacies of twenty-first century publishing. I appreciate the advice from outside my core specializations of Old English language and literature. It hardly needs to be added that any errors are my own responsibility.

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"A Kodiak Poem" is reprinted from *Effort at Speech: New and Selected Poems* by William Meredith, published by TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press in 1997. Copyright © 1997 by William Meredith. All rights reserved; used by permission of Northwestern University Press and Richard Harteis.

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Contents

List of Tables *page* viii
Acknowledgments x

1 General Principles of Poetic Form 1
2 Indo-European and Germanic Meters 35
3 Old English Meter in the Era of *Beowulf* 54
4 From Late Old English Meter to Middle English Meter 89
5 Middle English Type A1 and the Hypermetrical B-Verse 134
6 Type A1 in the A-Verse 176
7 Types B and C 190
8 Survival and Extinction in Types A2, Da, and E 208
9 Type Db and the Hypermetrical A-Verse 233
10 The Birth of English Iambic Meter 259
11 General Summary 272

Notes 278
Glossary 304
Bibliography 310
Index 317

Tables

3.1 Verse Types Reliably Attested in *Beowulf* *page* 61
4.1 Medial Dips in Types A, D, and E 101
4.2 Medial Dips in Hypermetrical A-Verses 103
4.3 Medial Dips in Hypermetrical B-Verses 106
4.4 Medial Dips in Variants with the First Foot Occupied by a Word Group 107
4.5 Dips in the Sxs Foot of Type B 111
4.6 Frequencies for A-Verse Dips in the Sxs Foot of Type B 111
4.7 Dips in the Sxxs Foot of Long Type B 113
4.8 Frequencies for A-Verse Dips in the Sxxs Foot of Long Type B 113
4.9 Dips in the Sxs Foot of Type Db 114
4.10 Dips in the Sxxs Foot of Long Type Db 115
4.11 Long Initial Dips that Include Light Feet 117
4.12 Placement of Finite *Wesan* 118
4.13 Placement of Finite Auxiliaries 120
4.14 Placement of Light Main Verbs and Quasi-Auxiliaries 121
4.15 Placement of the Remaining Finite Verbs 123
5.1 Interpretation of High-Frequency Words with Weak Final *-e* 139
5.2 Interpretation of High-Frequency Words Ending in Weak *e* Plus Consonant 141
5.3 Dip Structures in the Corpus of Limited Ambiguity 151
5.4 Dip Structures in the Larger Corpus 153
5.5 Word Placement in the Dips of Type A1 B-Verses 157
5.6 Word Placement in the Dips of Hypermetrical B-Verses 158
6.1 Dip Structures for Type A1 A-Verses in the Smaller Corpus 177
6.2 Dip Structures for Type A1 A-Verses in the Larger Corpus 177
7.1 Distribution of Type C According to the Length of the Initial Dip 191
7.2 Distribution of B Variants in the Smaller Corpus 200
7.3 Distribution of B Variants in the Larger Corpus 201
8.1 Distribution of A2 Variants in the Smaller Corpus 216
8.2 Distribution of A2 Variants in the Larger Corpus 216

8.3 Distribution of Da Variants in the Smaller Corpus 226
8.4 Distribution of Da Variants in the Larger Corpus 226
9.1 Distribution of Db Variants in the Smaller Corpus 236
9.2 Distribution of Db Variants in the Larger Corpus 238
9.3 Distribution of Db Variants with Triple Alliteration in the Smaller Corpus 242
9.4 Distribution of Db Variants with Triple Alliteration in the Larger Corpus 243
9.5 Comparison of Db Variants with Double and Triple Alliteration 243
9.6 Distribution of Hypermetrical A-Verses in the Smaller Corpus 248
9.7 Distribution of Hypermetrical A-Verses in the Larger Corpus 249
9.8 Distribution in the Smaller Corpus of Hypermetrical A-Verses with Triple Alliteration 250
9.9 Distribution in the Larger Corpus of Hypermetrical A-Verses with Triple Alliteration 251
9.10 Comparison of Hypermetrical A-Verses with Double and Triple Alliteration 251
10.1 Dips in the Bob and Wheel 269

CHAPTER 1

General Principles of Poetic Form

1.1 Metrics, Linguistics, and Literary Creation

A widely used history of English discusses the structure of the modern language before tracing its descent from its oldest ancestor, Proto-Indo-European.[1] This design introduces essential linguistic concepts with familiar examples. Comparison of English with languages like Sanskrit, Armenian, and Gaelic then highlights shared features discovered by historical linguists. Comparison with languages like Chinese and Hebrew distinguishes features due to common Indo-European origin from features also present in unrelated languages. I have adopted a similar design in this book, which introduces metrical concepts with Modern English examples, compares English poetry with poetry in other languages, then traces the evolution of English meters from prehistory to the Modern English period.

Work on linguistic universals, which began in earnest during the 1960s, has made it easier to analyze a newly discovered language or an ancient language preserved in written form.[2] Since the foundational work of Chomsky, researchers have been testing proposed universals against a representative sample of the world's languages.[3] We are now better equipped to identify what is English about English and what is simply human.

I hope to persuade linguists that a universalist theory of meter makes a useful addition to established linguistic sub-fields. Historical linguists, of course, have always relied on metrical rules for analysis of languages with no living speakers. An 1885 study of Old English meter provided an indispensable foundation for research on the evolution of English.[4] Use of metrical evidence has been rudimentary for the most part, however, drawing on obvious requirements of a particular verse form. Linguistics can profit from a genuine *theory* of poetic form, one that considers not only the practical consequences of metrical rules but also their relation to rules of ordinary language, the architecture of systems into which metrical rules

are organized, the evolution of metrical rule systems in tandem with linguistic systems, and the relation of a given system to other systems that arise in other languages.

I hope to persuade literary scholars that a universalist approach to a challenging meter, whether ancient or contemporary, can advance our understanding of its fundamental principles. I have also written with experimental poets in mind because they are often quite well informed about linguistics and share my interest in determining what counts as poetic independently of the rules for any particular tradition.

For study of metrical evolution, English is an obvious place to start. It is the most thoroughly studied language on the planet. The most thoroughly studied group of related languages is the Indo-European group to which English belongs. Alliterative meter, the kind of meter employed in *Beowulf*, can be traced from its birth in the first millennium BC to its death about two thousand years later. The traditional form that replaced it, iambic pentameter, held a unique position at the highest levels of poetic craft from Chaucer to the Romantics.

To my knowledge, nothing like this project has been attempted before. There is an important PhD thesis on metrical change from Old to Middle English poetry, but it does not propose a universalist theory of poetic form.[5] As will soon become apparent, I have profited from research on poetic universals by theoretical linguists.[6] These researchers are not primarily concerned with English alliterative meters or with evolution of metrical systems, however. The number of academic fields involved precludes exhaustive coverage in every field, which would make this book far too long. For information about previous research I have emphasized publications with significant scope that offer good introductions to their topics and useful bibliography. My purpose is to show that a universalist theory squares with reputable scholarship in the pertinent fields, not to intervene in all of them. Relevant technical arguments from my own publications are usually summarized rather than repeated.

1.2 Sound Echoes in "A Kodiak Poem" (William Meredith)

Some experimental poetry in English employs sound echoes that are non-traditional but also quite accessible. Consider item (1), for example.[7]

(1) Precipitous is the shape and stance of the spruce
Pressed against the mountains in gestures of height,
Pleasing to Poussin the white, repetitious peaks.

Fonder mountains surely curl around your homeland,
Fondle the home farms with a warmer green;
Follow these hills for cold only, or for fool's gold.

Easy winds sweep lengthwise along the known places,
Essay brittle windows and are turned away;
Eskimo houses had seal-gut windows that the east wind drummed.

A fish people now, once fur hunters and fierce,
Fire-needing, they buried their dead with faggots,
And when a man went to their hell, he froze.

Remembering the lands before but much more real,
Look where, aloft, you cannot say how except rarely,
The raven, rich in allusion, rides alone.

In representing his arctic landscape, Meredith links its breathtaking geometric regularity to its terrifying weather. He appreciates the heroic achievement of its inhabitants while expressing a preference for warmer, less austerely symmetrical climes. Meredith presents his argument in an appropriate form that departs from traditional regularity. The most familiar sound echo in English poetry since the Renaissance is rhyme, which matches sounds at the end of the line-final word. Meredith begins with a mirror image of this convention, matching sounds at the beginning of the line-initial word. The match often involves more than one sound and could obviously not be due to chance. It is a kind of alliteration but differs from alliteration as used in *Beowulf* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*

The first two lines of Meredith's poem match the consonants [p], [r], and [s] in the line-initial words. The third line also matches initial [p], the letter < e >, and the letter < s >, which has its voiced pronunciation as [z] in this instance.[8] In the second stanza we find matching of the first four phonemes in *fonder* and *fondle*, derivatives of the same linguistic root that are related in meaning. In the third line, *follow* misses out [n] and [d] but matches [l] in the second syllable of *fondle.* The third stanza matches all the letters in *easy* and *essay* but the sounds of these letters do not match at all, as the phonetic transcriptions [izi] and [ɛse] make clear. In a literate tradition, matching can involve letters as well as sounds. In the second and third lines, there is alphabetical and phonetic matching of [ɛs] in *essay* and *Eskimo.* Meredith breaks the pattern in the fourth stanza, where the initial letters and sounds are different in every line. To find the alliteration between *fish* and line-initial *fire*, we need to go one syllable inside the first line. In the third line, the only f-alliteration is at the end, on *froze.* Once nudged to the right, we notice that the most regular alliteration now occurs in line-final words, with *fierce* and

faggots matching *froze*. The rightward shift has been anticipated by sporadic non-initial matching in previous stanzas: *Poussin* and *peaks* in stanza one, *farms* and *fool's* in stanza two, *easy* and *east* in stanza three. The echo in stanza three is highlighted within the phrase *east wind*, an unmistakable two-word echo of *easy winds*. The final stanza interweaves distinct patterns of alliteration. In its first two lines, alliteration on *real* and *rarely* continues the line-final patterning of the fourth stanza. In the last line, the r-alliteration shifts to the middle of the line with *raven, rich*, and *rides*. A second system of alliteration on [l] links *lands, aloft*, and *allusion*, then finishes in line-final position with *alone*. Meredith has not replaced line-final rhyme with any other fixed scheme. The metrical variety of his poem implements a preference for asymmetry expressed on the literal level.

Alliteration has not entirely replaced rhyme-like matching at the end of the word. It is hard to overlook the *cold/gold* rhyme in stanza two. A linguist would add that the initial [k] and [g] sounds of these words are velar stops that differ only in voicing. Several of the rhyme-like echoes would not be found in canonical English poetry, for example *surely/curl, farms/warmer*, and *fur/fire*. The matching is scrambled in *precipitous/repetitious*, but the sheer number of sounds involved makes it effective.

Although Meredith's sound echoes are non-traditional in English, many of them are regulated in other traditions. Every line of skaldic court poetry employs one rhyme comparable to *surely/curl* (called *aðalhending*) and one rhyme comparable to *farms/warmer* (called *skothending*).[9] Matching pairs like *precipitous/repetitious* are well established in rap lyrics that disseminate verse forms of the global twenty-first century. Poets can be sure that a sound echo is effective if echoes of the same kind turn up in popular songs.

Links Between Form and Content

The author has integrated formal experiment with thematic material. The protean variability of the form implements Meredith's challenge to Poussin, a painter known for the mathematical regularity of his landscapes. Sympathy for heroic culture expressed on the literal level is underscored by choice of alliteration as the predominant sound echo. Readers of English poetry are sure to associate this sound echo with *Beowulf*. The raven "rich in allusion" alludes, among other things, to the carrion-eater of Old English poetry, whose enthusiasm for warfare as a source of nourishment stands in ironic contrast to the grim outlook for human beings.[10] Gathering of the wolf, eagle, and raven before a battle provides a vivid foretaste of doom in this pessimistic tradition.

Specified Location, Proximity, Frequency, and Theme in Metrical Domains

Moving now toward universalist poetics, we step back from one particular work and inquire what *kinds* of craftsmanship communicate poetic form. *Specified location* plays an important role. If the odds against accidental alliteration at the beginning of adjacent lines are, say, 25 to 1 on average, the odds against a third match in the following line will be 25 squared (625) to 1. A linguistic event with such low probability will be noticed. The likelihood of chance occurrence decreases even more sharply for repetition of two adjacent sounds in a specified location, as with *fondle* and *follow*. *Proximity* functions like predictable location. There is no *r-* alliteration in the initial or final words of Meredith's last line, but the three *r-* words clustered in the middle, however unexpected, are sure to attract attention. *Frequency* adds to the salience of matching in predictable locations or close proximity, with each continuation of the same match lowering the probability of chance occurrence. A *poetic domain* can showcase matching words placed within it. Line-initial alliteration has added salience when it fills a stanza entirely, as in the first three stanzas of Meredith's poem. Specified location, proximity, frequency, and domain are intimately related aspects of poetic form and a change in one can augment or diminish the effect of another.

Meredith's stanzas are marked as coherent domains by some purely visual cues of literary convention. The spaces between stanzas have no stable equivalent in oral performance. Binding of clauses by semicolons within a stanza is a literate convention related quite indirectly to the acoustic signal. These stanzas can be identified at the speed of recitation, however. In addition to being marked by alliterative techniques, each one is a conceptual unit with an identifiable theme: the altitude and whiteness of arctic mountains in stanza one; contrast with smaller, green hills in the warm climes of stanza two; wind in stanza three; basic survival technologies in stanza four; and mortality in stanza five.

1.3 Themes and Binding Domains in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18

Comparison of Meredith's poem with earlier work will help us abstract away from a particular era of literary history. Consider item (2), Shakespeare's well-known sonnet 18.[11]

(2) Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed.
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Item (2) consists of three stanzas with four lines each, called *quatrains*, followed by a two-line domain called a *couplet*. In the edition cited here, sonnets are printed without extra spaces between these domains. The first quatrain presents the topic and the second one develops it. In the third quatrain there is a conspicuous turn of thought, marked overtly by *but*. Finally, in the couplet, the poet makes a concluding statement and we see where the argument has been tending: a poet's praise confers a kind of immortality on the person celebrated. Shakespeare's poetry draws on the culture of the European Renaissance, in which sonnets typically celebrate an object of personal affection; but the *Beowulf* poet makes similar claims for the power of heroic epic, which bestows undying glory on praiseworthy heroes (sections 2.2–4). At a still higher level of generality, both poets weave statements about art into topics that are not inherently artistic. In this case as in others, comparative study can guard against bias by working respectfully through cultural detail toward the level of generality at which a valid universal appears.[12]

A regular patterning of sound echoes called a *rhyme scheme* helps unify the domains of sonnet 18. Each quatrain has a distinct set of alternating rhymes and the couplet has a distinct rhyming pair. Sound echoes perform an integrative or *binding* function in these units. In Meredith's poem, consistent leftward sound echoes in the first three stanzas create line groupings that are novel and also well integrated. Use of a specified binding pattern in the opening stanzas establishes the three-line unit well enough to allow for more variety in the final two stanzas, which are also integrated by alliteration but in different ways.

1.4 Linguistic Features of Effective Sound Echoes

Stressed syllables provide effective sound echoes because they are rather distinctly pronounced and allow for a wide variety of vowels. In American English, the vowel of an unstressed syllable is typically reduced to schwa,