

Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 20

The Composition of Old English Poetry

H. Momma



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521554817

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First published 1997
This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the
Abraham and Rebecca Stein Faculty Publication Fund
of New York University, Department of English.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Momma, H.

The composition of Old English poetry / H. Momma.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Anglo-Saxon England: 20)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0 521 55481 0

1. English language – Old English, ca. 450–1100 – Versification.

I. Title. II. Series.

PE253.M66 1997

829'109 – dc20 96–1863 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-55481-7 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-55481-0 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03076-2 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-03076-5 paperback

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THE COMPOSITION OF
OLD ENGLISH POETRY

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ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

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To my mother

Preface

The long and slow gestation of this book reflects my growth as a scholar, and those whom I have the privilege of thanking in this preface are the very people who have made my academic career possible. Some of the ideas I present in this book go back to the earliest years of my academic training. I wrote a master's thesis on the composition of *Beowulf* in 1983 at Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan, under the supervision of Seizo Kasai, whose undergraduate seminar a few years before had introduced me to Old English language and literature. It was Professor Kasai who encouraged me to challenge the common belief that Old English poetry is composed in loose syntax in order to compensate for the strict prosodical requirements. After poring over the individual half-lines of *Beowulf* typed on some sixty-four hundred cards, I proposed a relatively moderate conclusion in a thesis filled with statistical charts, that in *Beowulf* syntactic freedom is allowed only to words within the frame of the half-line, but that, in order to receive this prosodical protection, syntactic divisions must coincide with prosodical divisions. I repeated this conclusion in two published articles, one based on my MA thesis and the other on a new analysis of other Old English poems. Bruce Mitchell and Jane Roberts kindly read these studies and gave me helpful suggestions. Dr Mitchell also included them in his annotated bibliography of Old English syntax, with the comment that 'the concepts are not new but the findings are worth studying'.

If anything at all in my earliest work was worth further studying, I believe that it lies in the heart of this book. For a long time I was aware of a set of 'findings' which apparently contradicted the conclusion of my thesis: the prosodical frame of the half-line certainly allows syntactic freedom to 'heavy' words (nouns, adjectives and the like), but 'light' words

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(conjunctions, pronouns, auxiliary verbs and the like) seem to be subject to strict syntactic restrictions even within the frame of the half-line. I nevertheless refrained from examining this problem, because I knew that such a study would require a systematic analysis of numerous 'light' words, which occur in Old English poetry by the hundred and sometimes even by the thousand.

With these 'worthy findings' still unexamined, I crossed the Pacific in 1985 to pursue graduate work in medieval studies at the University of Toronto. Two events during my first years there are particularly important to the development of my study. First, the large university library gave me the opportunity to consult other scholars' work, including Kuhn's thesis on word stress and word order in Germanic, which, as I discovered, discusses issues related to my 'findings' but from a different perspective. Second, my experience as a research assistant at *The Dictionary of Old English* project taught me how to handle vast amounts of Old English material with the aid of catalogues, concordances and other reference tools. For this, I am especially grateful to Antonette diPaolo Healey and the late Ashley Crandell Amos, then the co-editors of the *Dictionary*, for entrusting to me the compilation of attested spellings for several high-frequency words. Towards the end of that decade, I was finally ready for undertaking my long-meditated project, now the subject of my PhD dissertation.

I wrote my doctoral dissertation under the superb guidance of Roberta Frank. No words can fully express my gratitude for her unfailing and continuous support, first as a supervisor and then as a mentor. Every detail about Professor Frank that I can recall now – her office door which was always open, a talk she gave which was full of wit and humour, the first article by her that I read, which had left me awe-struck, her commitment to the institution, her devotion to the field, and far more – testifies to how much she has taught me, both in words and deeds, about the profession: what high standards I should set for myself, and how much responsibility I should take for the sake of others. I would also like to thank H. A. Roe and Geoffrey Russom for their advice on linguistic and metrical issues in the dissertation. I am grateful to Patricia J. Eberle, whose generous help enabled me to place my work in a larger context. A completed manuscript was read by A. diP. Healey, H. Mayer, A. G. Rigg, H. A. Roe and G. Russom, whose valuable comments put my PhD dissertation into its final shape.

Preface

Upon the completion of my doctorate in 1992, I took a teaching position at New York University as a successor to the late Jess B. Bessinger, Jr, whose concordance to Old English poetry was probably the single most valuable tool for my research. While I taught, I reinforced the theoretical background of my work by writing new chapters and adding more material to the old ones. Some of the new material was taken from the conference papers I had presented at the Modern Language Association Conference and the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University. I owe the enrichment of my study to various support I received from friends, mentors and fellow scholars: Patricia Bethel, Mary Blockley, Thomas Cable, Patrick W. Conner, Edwin W. Duncan, Kari E. Gade, Anna A. Grotans, Pauline Head, B. Rand Hutcheson, Peter J. Lucas, E. G. Stanley and Andrew C. Troup. I am grateful to David Megginson for, among other things, his help in using the computer. I received much encouragement and moral support from my colleagues at New York University, especially from Mary J. Caruthers, David L. Hoover, Anthony Low and Robert R. Raymo. I owe my gratitude to the Department of English at New York University, whose generous Stein Fund facilitated the production of this book.

The last stage of the development of this book entailed the process of transforming a PhD dissertation into a book. For this, my greatest thanks are due to Michael Lapidge, who painstakingly read several versions of my manuscript. Professor Lapidge's suggestions helped me greatly to improve the style of my writing and to clarify arguments in many parts of the book. I completed the typescript during the year of leave as a Visiting Fellow of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University. I would like to thank Fred C. Robinson for his kindly mentoring at Yale and also for commenting on part of this work.

I would like to thank my friends and my students who worked with me as research assistants, proof-readers and copy-editors at various stages: Ken J. Anderson, Charles A. Baldwin, Gregory J. Darling, Heide R. Estes, Joanne A. Findon, Catherine Georgi, Michael E. Matto, Bonnie Robinson, Robert G. Stanton, Mineko Takekuma and Sheila M. Walsh. All the remaining mistakes are, however, mine.

I would like to thank Jane A. Mark and Frank J. Visich of Jane's in New York City, where I did most of the revision with my portable computer plugged into their store wall. And last of all, my deepest thanks to my family: to my father for his understanding, to my sister for her

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compassion and to my mother for her support in all these years, for the hundreds of hours of her research assistance at early stages of my work and for her unwavering faith in my potential, which kept me going even when I was not certain about it myself.

Abbreviations

ANQ	<i>American Notes and Queries</i>
ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
ASPR	Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
BGDSL	<i>Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur</i>
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
DOE	<i>The Dictionary of Old English</i>
EEMF	Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile
EETS	Early English Text Society
ES	<i>English Studies</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
N&Q	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
OES	B. Mitchell, <i>Old English Syntax</i> , 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985)
PBA	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
PQ	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
SN	<i>Studia Neophilologica</i>
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
TPS	<i>Transactions of the Philological Society</i>

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1

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'.¹ 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 D. 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.

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,⁸ but makes no mention of whether the poet sang them with measure, chanted them with melody or just narrated them.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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. Hernández, Old English Colloquium Series 1 (Berkeley, CA, 1982), 37–46, at 39.

¹⁰ 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).

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.

¹² 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 [sic]' (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 irregular¹⁹ 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).

¹⁷ 'Wæs þær in þam [fore]sprecanan 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. Gosser in *Das angelsächsische Prosa-leben des heiligen Guthlac*, *Anglistische Forschungen* 27 (Heidelberg, 1909).

¹⁸ Stanley, 'Prosaic Vocabulary', pp. 387 and 390.

¹⁹ ASPR 5, xvii.

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).

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

²³ 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*.

²⁴ 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