

Metrical Observations of OE Verse

Joo-hyon Kim *

1. **General characteristics of OE verse**
2. **The metrical types of OE verse**
 - a) Sievers's basic types
 - b) Creed's types
 - c) Comparison between Sievers's types and Creed's
 - d) Some remarks on variants of basic types
3. **Alliteration as a metrical device**
4. **Conclusion**

1. General characteristics of OE verse

Before going into metrical observations of OE verse, it is worth observing its characteristic features. When we examine closely some of the lines of OE verse still extant from the epic, secular or religious, to the lyric, and the charms and riddles and gnomic verses, ⁽¹⁾ we can easily find that they have some features in common—a formalized metrical plan, rich surface ornamentation, repetition and a considerable license in syntax.

Generally speaking, OE verse is definitely under a consistent tetrametrical plan—a line is divided in the middle, and in each half-line there are two main stresses, and it does not matter how many unstressed syllables are in the line as long as the four main stresses are in it, since the OE metre counts stresses rather than syllables and if more than four main stresses are found in the line, it is called

* Professor of English(Ph. D in English Philology)

1. According to my count of the lines of OE verse, some 30,000 lines are still extant, of which the 3182 lines of Beowulf make up the greatest part. See my article 'The Major Influence on English of the old stress shift in Germanic languages', Soong Sil College theses collection #1, 1967.

hypermetric.

In OE verse, just as the four main stresses are required in the line, so is alliteration. The alliteration is always found under the main stresses, and the first three strongly stressed syllables are generally made alliterative in the manner which will be mentioned in § 3. It plays an important role in welding the line itself together, producing impressive as well as musical effects by repeating the same sounds.

Apart from these metrical devices, OE verse is very heavily ornamented with words or phrases with which prose writers are unfamiliar. The Anglo-Saxon poet-singer or *scop* must have learnt a large vocabulary—a great store of conventional phrases or words, particularly the so-called Kennings⁽²⁾ whose whole tissue is metaphorical—in order to employ them freely as ornaments on an occasion calling for poetic utterance, and besides, the *scop* was apparently endowed with a skill in composing long passages heavily ornamented with splendid words and rhythmically balanced with varied arrangements of main stresses. In such richly ornamented passages, most things are mentioned two or three times or even more in varied terms; for instance, in the following Caedmon's Hymn, the *scop* used varied epithets for God—eight of them in nine lines.

Nu(we) sculon herian

Meotodes meahte

Weorc Wuldor faeder

Ece Dryhten,

He aereſt ſceop

Heofon to hrofe,

pa middangeard

ece Dryhten,

Heofonrices Weard

and His modgepanc

ſwa He wundra gehwæs,

or onſtealde,

eorpan bearnum

halig Scyppend;

mancynnes Weard;

æfter teode

2. The Kenning is a kind of short metaphorical word compound which generally requires our imagination for the solution of its meaning, such as Hranrad ('whale-road' for sea) or Brim-hengest ('sea-horse' for ship), most of the kennings are so enigmatic and vague that they are sometimes inadequate as images.

firum foldan,

Frea ælmightig⁽³⁾

Such ornamentation in the form of a dignified parade of varied epithets for God is a good evidence for the *scop*'s love of fine language. In fact, not only Caedmon himself but also other poet-singers of his day loved and appreciated such fine language.

The repetitiousness caused by the heavy ornamentation of passages by means of lavish use of synonymous words or phrases beginning with various sounds in order to make possible varied alliteration obviously brought about a considerable license in syntax, i. e., the ruin of normal word-order. But in spite of such license, a great effect of emphasis was obtained when the verse was orally delivered to the audience.

The long and easy-going OE verse, metrically well-balanced and rhythmically well-organized, with its peculiar characteristic features mentioned above, is a fully matured product of long culture, as Professor Ker says "Anglo-Saxon poetry, such as we know it, is at the end of its progress; already mature, and with little prospect in front of it except decay"⁽⁴⁾

2. The metrical types of OE verse

a) Sievers's basic types

Of the many theories and systems of scansion of OE verse devised by scholars, E. Sievers's theory has been considered a most valuable pioneer work which affords help in establishing a metrical standard for OE verse. The following are his basic metrical types:⁽⁵⁾

3. Varied epithets for God are underlined.

4. *English Literature, Medieval*: ed. by W. P. Ker, Thornton Butterworth, 1932, p. 41.

5. For further details, See *Altgermanische Metrik*, ed. by E. Sievers, Halle, 1893 or *Beowulf*, ed. by Fr. Klaeber, Heath, 1936, p. 281.

Type A: / × | / ×

(Each of the two stressed syllables is followed by an unstressed syllable)

Ex. / × | / ×
Ex. feasceaft funden. Beowulf 7a

Type B: × / | × /

(This is the reverse of type A)

Ex. × / | × /
Ex. Pam eafera was. Beowulf 13a

Type C: × / | / ×

(The two main stresses fall together in the middle of the verse)

Ex. × / | / ×
Ex. Oft Scyld Scefing. Beowulf 4a

Type D: (a) / | / \ ×

(b) / | / × \
(The two main stresses come at the beginning of the verse)

Ex. (a) / | / \ ×
Ex. (a) Weard Scildinga. Beowulf 229 b

(b) / | / × \
(b) Weold Wideferhp. Beowulf 702 a

Type E: / \ × | /

(The main stresses fall at opposite ends of the verse)

Ex. / \ × | /
Ex. Weorþmyndum þah. Beowulf 8 b

b) Creed's types

Besides Sievers's basic types, I wish to remark here on other types which Professor Robert P. Creed, Brown University, worked out some years ago by modifying Sievers's types.⁽⁶⁾ They are not completely at variance with Sievers's findings; Creed's types are identical with Sievers's except for Types B and C which are as follows:

Creed's basic types:

Type A ₁	/	×		/	×
Type A ₃	×	×	×		/
Type B	×	×	×		/
Type C	×	×	×		/
Type D (a)	/		/	\	×
(b)	/		/	×	\
Type E	/	\	×		/

c) Comparison between Sievers's types and Creed's

As mentioned above, Creed's basic types are identical with Sievers's except for Types B and C, which are completely different in metrical quality. Sievers's Type B is iambic in quality—the first foot of the half-line is iambic, and so too is the second foot, and his Type C is half-iambic and half-trochaic, but in each of Creed's Types B and C, a kind of dactylic foot is preceded by a foot of unstressed syllables.

The following basic patterns of rhythmic measure worked out by Creed eventually eliminated the iambic quality from his OE metrical types.

| / × |, | / × \ |, | / \ × |, ⁽⁷⁾ | / |, | × × × |

These patterns of trochaic or dactylic quality are peculiarly suitable for the scansion of OE verse because OE words which are stressed on the first syllable theoretically produce a falling rhythm, and also the swift, turbulent and aggressive qualities characteristic of the Germanic temperament naturally postulate the predominance of trochaic or dactylic patterns. In fact, OE verse is capable of fluent effects of swift movement, of turbulent action, of clangorous sonorities only when the trochaic rhythmic patterns are arranged rhythmically in the line.

According to Sievers's theory, The following passage of Beowulf (lines 720 to

6. Creed's types were introduced to us by Prof. Kim, Kwon Ho, Korea University, in his article on 'The metre of OE verse.', *vid.* Phoenix, #9. Korea University Press, 1964, pp. 48—56

7. This pattern is peculiarly fit both for compounds abundantly used in OE verse and for derivatives with important suffixes which deserve secondary stress.

727 inclusive) is scanned as follows: (The metrical type of each half-line is marked in the margins)

A. Com pa to recede rinc sipian D.

A. dreamum bedæled. Duru sona onarn E.

E. fyrbendum fæst, Syppan he hire folmum æthran B.

A. onbræd pa bealohydig, Pa(he ge) bolgen wæs, B.

(with anacrusis)

A. recedes mupan. Rape æfter pon E.

B. on fagne flor feond treddode Db.

A. eode yrremod; him of eagum stod B.

A. ligge gelicost leoht unfæger A.

If in the above scansion, the iambic metrical types of the half-line marked by the letter B are changed into dactylic quality according to Creed's Type B as below, the scansion will be more theoretically adaptable to the swift movement and turbulent passions vividly expressed in the whole passage.

Syppan he hire folmum æthran

pa he ge bolgen wæs

on fagne flor

him of eagum stod

Another thing worth observing here is that according to Siever's types, there are

generally four main stresses—two in each half-line—in the line of OE verse, even though hypermetric lines which have more than four main stresses may be found here and there in a few passages; but if we follow Creed's types, four main stresses are not generally required in the line because his Types A₃, B and C have only one main stress; therefore, the lines having three main stresses occur frequently.

Examples: × | / × \ / | / × \
 on fagne flor feond treddode
 / × | / × × × | / × /
 eode yrremod, him of eagum stod

d) Some remarks on variants of basic types

Something should be noted here concerning variants of basic metrical types, especially those of Creed, because they necessarily demand some variation or expansion for the sake of the satisfactory scansion of the verse.⁽⁸⁾

In Type A, each of the two stressed syllables is followed by an unstressed syllable, but the number of unstressed syllables in the first foot is not limited to one, but increases as occasion demands, although in the second foot it is invariably restricted to one or two at most.

Ex. / × × | / × (dreamum bedæled. Beowulf 721 a)

 / × × × | / × (healde mine wisan. Riddles 8, 4a)

And Type A sometimes exhibits anacrusis in front of the half-line.

Ex. × | / × | / × (Pa : com of more. Beowulf 710a)

Besides, on rare occasion, a varied form of Type A with a secondary stress in one or either foot is found. If the form has a secondary stress in the first foot, the pattern of rhythmic measure becomes | / \ × | or | / × \ |, and if in the second foot, it becomes | / \ | or | / \ × |.

8. For the variants of Sievers's types, See Fr. Klaeber, ed. op. cit., p. 281.

Ex.	$\diagup \diagdown \times \diagup \times$	(Sundwudu sohte.	Beowulf 208 a)
	$\diagup \diagdown \times \diagup \diagdown \times$	(Mapum for Metode.	ibid 169 a)
	$\diagup \times \diagdown \diagup \diagdown$	(Aepeling ær-god.	ibid. 130 a)
	$\diagup \times \diagup \diagdown$	(Stræt wæs stanfah.	ibid. 320a)

In Types A₃ and C, the number of unstressed syllables in the first foot is very elastic as the following examples show:

	$\times \times \times \times \times \diagup \times$	(Ne gefeah he pare fæhpe.	Beowulf 109 a)
	$\times \times \times \times \times \diagup \diagdown \times$	(Para þe he him mid hæfde.	ibid. 1625 b)

As stated above, Type B is different from Type A₃ in scansion of the second foot; so too is Type C from Type A₃. And in Type B, unstressed syllables are not so admissible as in Types A₃ or C.

Type D has two forms—Type D_a and Type D_b, in each of which the two main stresses come at the beginning of the verse. The difference between them lies only in the different scansion of the second foot as stated already. But as varied forms, they occasionally have an unstressed syllable in the first foot.

Ex.	$\diagup \times \diagup \diagdown \times$ ⁽⁹⁾	(Side sænæssas.	Beowulf 223 a)
	$\diagup \times \diagup \times \diagdown$	(Wærig, wiges sæd.	Brunan 2 a)

Type E also is not exempt from variation, because here the first foot is replaced, though rarely, with the second foot of Type D_b as follows:

Ex.	$\diagup \times \diagdown \diagup$	(Morpor-bed stred.	Beowulf 2436 b)
-----	--------------------------------------	--------------------	-----------------

And besides, Type E sometimes has an unstressed syllable after the stressed syllable in the second foot, and also anacrusis may be found in front of the first

9. In this case, the form is very similar in scansion to Type A.

foot.

According to the above-mentioned Creed's types, scansion of Caedmon's Hymn is as follows:

A₃. Nu(we) sculon herian Heofonrices Weard, E.

A₁. Meotodes meahte and His modgepanc, B.

D_a. Weorc wuldorfæder, swa He wundra gehwæs, B.

A₁. ece Dryhten, or onstealde A₁.

B. He ærest sceop eorpan bearnum A₁.

A₁. Heofon to hrofe, haling Scyppend; A₁.

B. Pa middangeard mancynnes Weard, E.

A₁. ece Dryhten, æfter teode A₁.

A₁. firum foldan, Frea ælmyhtig. D_a.

(The metrical type of each half-line is marked in the margins)

3. Alliteration as a metrical device⁽¹⁰⁾

In OE verse, just as four main stresses are required in each line, so is alliteration; in other words, any line of OE verse is required to be welded by means of alliteration. Therefore, the pair of half-lines is to be linked together by the repetition of the sound of the first stressed syllable in the second half-line. This linking function of alliteration is considered one of the very important metrical

10. Refer to my article, *op. cit.*

devices; virtually, not only OE verse but also other Germanic verses are imperfect without alliteration, since the metrical form of the line is completed only when the stressed syllables of important words are welded by means of alliterating sounds.

In alliteration, the stressed syllable or syllables in the first half-line always alliterate with the first stressed syllable in the second half-line, since it gives the key to the alliteration in any given line. Therefore, the stressed syllables in the line form alliteration in such types as below:

a x || a x

(Stressed syllable 3 alliterates with stressed syllable 1)

x a || a x

(Stressed syllable 3 alliterates with stressed syllable 2)

a a || a x

(Stressed syllable 3 alliterates with stressed syllables 1 and 2)

Here a stands for the stressed syllable which bears the alliterating sound (i. e., the stave), and x for the stressed syllable which does not bear the stave, and || stands for caesura, and the stave always falls on a syllable which bears the main stress of the word.

The consonant sounds which can form alliteration must be articulated at the same point and in the same manner, and no distinction is made between voiced and voiceless consonants, but clusters like sp, st, sk, are each regarded as single sounds, and do not alliterate with s. As to vowels, all of them alliterate with each other. And besides, in alliteration, words which bear a stave are generally nouns and adjectives, and the finite verb, but nouns and adjectives usually take precedence over the finite verb. Words like pronouns, prepositions, and conjunctions cannot bear a stave even if they are stressed.

Alliteration is observed with rigorous regularity in OE verse, but at the end of the tenth century some irregularities in the use of it are noticeable as we find out

in the Battle of Maldon.⁽¹¹⁾ This tendency toward the weakening of the older rules of alliteration, as Professor E. V. K. Dobbie remarks⁽¹²⁾ may be said to suggest the direction of the further relaxing of technique in ME alliterative verse.

Caedmon's Hymn is a doxology in balanced verse-paragraphs which follow the strict metrical structure of OE verse. It consists of nine lines of regular alliterative types:

Nu(we) sculon herian || Heofonrices Weard,
Meotodes meahte || and His modgepanc
Weorc Wuldor fæder, || swa He wundra gehwas,
ece Dryhten, || or onstealde,
He ærest sceop || eorpan bearnum
Heofon to hrofe, || halig Scyppend;
Pa middangeard || mancynnes Weard,
ece Dryhten, || æfter teode
firum foldan, || Frea ælmyhtig.

(The alliterating sounds are underlined here)

Alliteration has a long history; it must have arisen during the Germanic period after the strong stress became fixed on the root syllable of the word, because alliteration demands such a fixed strong stress. The alliteration which had functioned as a metrical device from its inception came to be somewhat ignored in England after the Norman Conquest, owing to the introduction of end-rime from the continent.

Even today, alliteration still survives in both poetry and prose, but it is not the same one as we have known in OE verse. It is not regularized, or bound to a fixed pattern, and is entirely different in its function from that of OE period.

11. For example, the second stressed syllable in the second half-line often bears the alliteration instead of the first stressed syllable (lines, 45, 75, 288), and double alliteration is occasionally found in the second half-line (lines, 29, 32, 192), and besides, end-rime though very rare is also found instead of alliteration (line, 271).

12. *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* ed. by E. V. K. Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1942, p. xxxii

4. Conclusion

I have so far made some observations on the characteristics of the metrical structure of OE verse, examining Siever's and Creed's theories or systems.

The above-mentioned mathematical or statistical formulas worked out by them according to their theories will surely help the reader establish a standard by which to judge the metrical structure of OE verse. But the mathematical formulas without a consideration of the musical value in scansion cannot be said to deal fully with the effect of the metre on the ear and the mind. From this point of view, Andreas Heusler by modifying Sievers's theory, worked out a new system. It is called 'Heusler's two-bar System'.⁽¹³⁾

His theory does not seriously conflict with Sievers's, but its most characteristic point of difference is the musical notation in scansion. According to his theory, the half-line is regarded as two bars of common time and the syllable that is long and bears a main stress fills half the bar at least; the syllable that is linguistically long but has only a secondary stress makes up only one-quarter of a bar, and the syllable that is linguistically short cannot fill more than one-quarter of the bar and may fill less, even as little as one-eighth, and if the syllables are not enough to fill the bar, there comes a rest (pause) as in music. His musical notation may be represented by the signs like — (for half note), × (for quarter note), U (for eighth note) and ^ (for quarter pause) respectively.⁽¹⁴⁾ He furthermore developed the importance of anacrusis with an idea that it may give the value of enjambement. Therefore, the two-bar system has the advantage of reducing all the types to a uniform rhythmical scheme running through all lines and admitting rests freely here and there.

13. Fr. Klaeber, ed. op. cit., p. 282

14. Examples: Nu(we) sculon herian Heofonrices Weard (Caedmon I)

Gomban gyldan, pæt was god cyning. (Beowulf II)

— ×^|—×^ × × ||—^^|××^^

Heusler's theory was supported with some supplement by such a scholar as Leonard who particularly emphasized the importance of the musical rest in the line,⁽¹⁵⁾ and after that, John C. Pope developed a new theory, in which he, following Heusler's views, laid special emphasis on the necessity of an initial rest as the occasion for the sounding of the harp⁽¹⁶⁾ as well as on the importance of anacrusis in the line. Obviously, Pope thinks that OE poetry can be appreciated better when it is sung or chanted with harp accompaniment than without accompaniment.⁽¹⁷⁾ Certainly these new ideas which emphasize the musical value in scansion can be said remarkably progressive or, more properly, revolutionary, and further studies in this field will be made in this direction, but Sievers's old theory will always remain basic.

15. For the details, see his 'Four Footnotes to Papers on Germanic Metrics' in *Studies in English Philology: a miscellany in honor of Fr. Klaeber*, Minneapolis, 1929.

16. A small six-stringed harp was discovered at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England, in 1939. This harp is believed to have been used by poet-singers in Caedmon's day, but no one knows how the harp was tuned or what kinds of music were played on it.

17. *The Rhythm of Beowulf*, ed. by J.C. Pope, New Haven, 1942.