

## Editing *Beowulf*: What Can Study of the Ballads Tell Us?

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After setting forth the editorial principles underlying the publication of the final volume, “Melodier,” of the magnificent collection of narrative song published under the title *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, Thorkild Knudsen called attention to an impasse in recent ballad research. In his view, the lack of productive new work in this field derived from a mistaken assumption about origins:<sup>1</sup>

Det er mit indtryk at balladeforskningen er nær stilstand samtidig med at balladeudgivelsen er nær afslutning. Grunden til denne situation er, efter min mening, at såvel udgivning som udforskning har været bundet og er bundet til en fejl grundopfattelse som er: balladen begynder som højkulturel digtning og musik. Tværtimod denne ide er min erfaring: *alt som er meningsløst om det skal forstas i forbindelse med en historisk højkultur bliver forunderlig enkelt om det sættes i forbindelse med en traditionel folkekultur.*

It is my impression that ballad research has nearly come to a halt at the same time as the ballad edition [i.e. *DgF*] is nearing its conclusion. The reason for this situation is, in my opinion, that both the editing and the research have been and are tied to a mistaken fundamental conception, which is that the ballad began as the poetry and music of an educated culture. My experience is exactly the opposite: *everything that lacks meaning if it is to be*

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<sup>1</sup> Knudsen et al. 1976:73. The translation is from this source with emphasis added, and with one comma added for clarity. The present essay is based on a paper I presented in Manchester in 1991 at a conference on “Editing Old English Texts.” I am thankful to the organizers of that conference, Donald G. Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach, for providing the opportunity for me to present my ideas in preliminary form in a context of lively discussion of the issues involved in textual editing.

*understood in the context of an historical educated culture becomes wonderfully simple if set in relation to a traditional popular culture.*

By citing these words as a prelude to an essay that addresses the principles of editing *Beowulf*, I do not mean to urge a corresponding attitude in regard to Anglo-Saxon poetry, a large part of which is clearly the work of learned authors. Still, Knudsen's remarks have a bearing on at least a few Old English texts whose stylistic features may at times seem anomalous from a learned perspective. Little but error can come from reading such works as *Beowulf*, *Waldere*, the *Finnsburh Fragment*, *Widsith*, *Deor*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer* as if they were either the fully formed creations of a lettered class or the debris of work of this kind. On the contrary, much in these poems that lacks intellectual or stylistic coherence when read in the context of Bede's and Alcuin's mental world becomes transparently clear when set in relation to a native tradition of oral narrative verse.

Although we can know of Anglo-Saxon oral tradition only by extrapolating from written documents—by its nature, oral poetry is not inscribed on vellum—we can be confident that for some generations, narrative or eulogistic songs dealing with the Germanic past had an honored place in the culture of the upper reaches of this society.<sup>2</sup> During most of the Anglo-Saxon period, the arts of literacy seem to have remained chiefly the privilege of an ecclesiastical elite despite a strong turn toward bookmaking in both Latin and English, as well as toward vernacular literacy, in the tenth and eleventh centuries (Wormald 1977, Kelly 1990, Keynes 1990). Regardless of the advance of literacy, the ruling class did not give up its oral culture overnight. A poem like *Beowulf*, clearly directed toward an audience with aristocratic status or interests, had a socially central function whether it was performed aloud or recorded in writing. By invoking ancestral history and a common set of values, it helped to acculturate new members of the aristocracy and served to bind the members of society together in a sense of common identity and purpose. To judge from the examples of it that happen to have come down to us,

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<sup>2</sup> See Opland 1980, with his citations to the scholarship on this subject. For a review of scholarship concerning the oral-formulaic theory of the composition of certain Old English texts, as this theory was stated by Magoun 1953 and Lord 1960 and has since been challenged and advanced by many scholars, see Olsen 1986 and 1988, Foley 1988:65-74.

Anglo-Saxon heroic verse was composed according to formal principles whose understanding would have been practically the birthright of the wealthy and privileged sectors of society, even though some effort of historical reconstruction may be required if we are to understand these principles with precision today.

Few people will quarrel with the idea that important features of some Old English poems derive ultimately from the praxis of generations of poets pursuing their craft in relative independence from the Latinate educational tradition (which also influenced these poets profoundly through its effects on the mentality of any thinking people). I am thinking of nothing arcane here, but rather of stylistic or formal features that tend to stand out at a glance. These include a reliance on traditional Germanic plots and characters, together with an allusive way of calling these legendary materials to mind; a pleonistic and additive style, coupled with a weakness for all things deictic and gnomic; a peculiar mixture of dialect forms, including many archaisms; a habit of invoking the authority of words heard aloud, rather than read; a blind eye to the time-line of clerical history; and a reliance on stock themes, interlocking systems of formulaic diction, and parallel, chiasmic, or echoic patternings that serve or could serve a mnemonic function.<sup>3</sup> The concept of “oral-derived” works (rather than “oral” ones *tout court*) is one that has received much attention of late (e.g. Foley 1990:5-8 and ff.) and is a key one in my formulation. It is meant to leave room for debate as to whether, in a particular instance, a text derives closely from oral antecedents or not.

Elsewhere I have discussed the probable nature of those acts of transmutation, or intersemiotic translation, by which some Old English poetry that was normally sung aloud may have been converted into written documents, or legible song (Niles 1993). Here I wish to make what I hope is a less controversial point, one that Richard Janko has made in relation to the Homeric poems and that A. N. Doane has advocated in the Old English context: that in preparing for print an Old English text that is not of obviously learned derivation, editors should refrain from smoothing out its

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<sup>3</sup> The features of an oral style and of the oral-traditional mentality that goes along with it have been discussed of late in the Anglo-Saxon context by Irving (1989:15-30) and by myself (Niles 1992), each drawing in different ways on Ong 1982.

ragged or rugged features in favor of textbook norms.<sup>4</sup>

It is by now a commonplace of anthropologically oriented literary research that wherever oral poetry occurs, it tends to have its own rhetoric that departs from the conventions of script or print. When a text is recorded from oral performance, it often displays vestigial features of orality even when mediated by well-educated scribes. However anomalous such features may seem in a literary context, they relate directly to how language functions when voiced aloud for a listening audience.<sup>5</sup> Editorial methods that work splendidly when applied to texts composed pen in hand may falter when applied to ones that derive from oral performance, even at some remove. When oral performances yield written documents, whether through the process of dictation to a scribe (or scribes) or by being called up in the memory of a singer who has gained competence in the uses of writing, the resulting texts are a secondary phenomenon. Despite their material solidity, they remain an alter ego of the literature in question, a kind of shadow self—though admittedly, the shadow may dwarf the object that projects it. As cultural artifacts, such texts may be found just as interesting as their sources (if not more so), and they may have puzzling features. To take one hypothetical example, I suspect that Cædmon's orally dictated verses, once they were written down—not his celebrated nine-line "Hymn," but rather the other works, not now extant, that Bede attributes to him in Book IV, Chapter 24 of his *Ecclesiastical History*—would have looked strange and unpolished, as texts, in the eyes of Anglo-Saxon readers who were familiar with the norms of lettered poetry. Scribes might have been tempted to improve those texts by correcting imperfect meter, adjusting faulty alliteration, fixing vague pronoun reference, standardizing

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<sup>4</sup> Janko 1990 (with a slightly different rationale than the one adopted here). Doane (1991) argues vigorously for a closer scholarly engagement with the status of Old English manuscripts as records of the human voice. His remarks should be read in conjunction with the discussion of Anglo-Saxon "transitional literacy" that is offered by O'Keeffe 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this discussion I use the word "text" in a deliberately narrow sense to refer to the product of a scribe's labors as opposed to the voicings of singers or speakers. If, more generally, a text can be thought of as "a weaving, woven thing," then oral works are such things, but here I wish to make a distinction between the written artifact and the spoken word. For a nuanced discussion of "textual communities" in a larger sense, one that encompasses acts of oral performance as well as of scribal record, see Stock 1990.

dialect forms, and so on. With very few exceptions, these are the sorts of things that nineteenth- and twentieth-century ballad editors have done routinely when they have got their hands on some unimproved text from oral tradition. When a modern scholar with high literary standards is faced with the task of editing a ragged Old English text, the temptation to correct its errors or anomalies is strong. My argument is that while this process of improvement may make the work more readable, it may also obscure our understanding of it in period-specific terms.

As one example of a broader phenomenon, I wish to call into question the specific practice of emending Old English texts for the sake of improved meter or alliteration. But first, let me justify my argument by a brief digression.

About twenty years ago, I began to supplement my armchair study of Old English, early Greek, and Old French epic poetry by embarking upon what has proved to be deeply rewarding research into living oral tradition. Lacking the fortitude to follow in the footsteps of those literary scholars who have learned South Slavic, I undertook to find out what I could about how popular ballads are learned, performed, and occasionally recorded from oral tradition in the British Isles and North America, sometimes studying the records of the past and sometimes bringing my tape recorder into the field.

It soon became evident to me that in the British-American context, it is damnably difficult to distinguish genuine expressions of traditional balladry from literary imitations. Particularly when sifting through the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century records, where literary reworkings and impostures abound, one may feel at a loss as to how to identify texts that come reliably from popular sources. Still there is one good rule of thumb: meter. If the meter of a ballad text is good, then the text is literary. If the meter is bad, then the text may well be a record of what a singer sang or dictated. For the sake of clarity, I should specify that by “good,” what I mean here is “correct according to the standards taught in schools and normally observed in print,” while by a “literary” text, I mean either one that was composed pen in hand by an educated author or one that was improved substantially by whoever prepared the song for print. Rarely, texts that are recorded faithfully from oral sources also scan well; but if they do, these texts were probably memorized verbatim from print and hence never entered into the orally recreative thought-world of a traditional singer. The texts have remained literary artifacts even though sung aloud.

Albert Lord has made a similar point about epic songs recorded by oral dictation in the Balkans. In his field experience, only when the scribe repeatedly stopped the singer to request lines with a “correct” syllable-count did a metrically smooth text result.<sup>6</sup> In such a situation the scribe serves as *de facto* editor, as he perhaps inevitably will do to some extent. His literary sensibility affects the poem from its first entry into written form as he renders into normal metrical lines a flow of words that, when voiced by a singer, has a distinct *rhythm* but not necessarily a well-defined *meter*, to make a distinction that is useful in the realm of balladry.

To appreciate the kind of metrical fluidity in ballad tradition to which I refer, one need only consult Bronson’s monumental anthology of the tunes of the Child ballads, in particular his appendix to Volume 4, which includes among many other materials some transcriptions of songs recorded since the 1950s by fieldworkers in Scotland.<sup>7</sup> Here I will cite just one example.

In 1803, the gist of the first part of the ballad that is generally classified as Child 106, “The Famous Flower of Serving Men,” found compelling expression in a poem, “The Lament of the Border Widow,” that Scott published in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Although once well known, this poem is perhaps not so familiar today as to preclude my quoting it in full (Scott 1802-3:381-82):

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<sup>6</sup> Lord 1960:126-27. Lord quotes one passage of 9 lines transcribed from a phonograph recording that Milman Parry made in 1934 of a singer from Nozi Pazar. The song was recited, not sung, and the lines vary from 6 to 14 syllables, with some admixture of prose. John Miles Foley finds Lord’s conclusions to be too sweeping. “The Stolac singers I am editing,” he writes, “compose metrically in full singing stride.” Where singers get into trouble, he notes, is “when they try to perform without the instrument and the mnemonic support [that] melody and rhythm provide.” (Personal communication of Jan. 15, 1993.)

<sup>7</sup> Bronson 1959-72. Bronson’s anthology serves as a companion piece to Child 1882-98. The large scholarly literature on British-American balladry is reviewed by Richmond 1989; two studies that remain central to the field are Fowler 1968 and Buchan 1972. For additional records of recent ballad tradition in Scotland, see Henderson and Collinson 1965.

My love he built me a bonny bower,  
 And clad it a' wi' lilye flour;  
 A brawer bower ye ne'er did see,  
 Than my true love he built for me.

There came a man, by middle day,  
 He spied his sport, and went away;  
 And brought the King that very night,  
 Who brake my bower, and slew my knight.

He slew my knight, to me sae dear;  
 He slew my knight, and poin'd his gear;  
 My servants all for life did flee,  
 And left me in extremitie.

I sew'd his sheet, making my mane;  
 I watched the corpse, myself alane;  
 I watched his body, night and day;  
 No living creature came that way.

I took his body on my back,  
 And whiles I gaed, and whiles I sat;  
 I digg'd a grave, and laid him in,  
 And happ'd him with the sod sae green.

But think na ye my heart was sair,  
 When I laid the moul' on his yellow hair;  
 O think na ye my heart was wae,  
 When I turn'd about, away to gae?

Nae living man I'll love again,  
 Since that my lovely knight is slain;  
 Wi' ae lock of his yellow hair  
 I'll chain my heart for evermair.

Despite the cloak of anonymity that Scott cast over this poem, which he claimed to be a "fragment, obtained from recitation in the Forest of Ettrick," there is more than one sign of a literary hand at work here. The northern dialect forms ("sae," "wae," "gae," and so on), embedded piecemeal in what is essentially an archaic English matrix, seem occasional and decorative rather than the substance of common speech. The threefold repetition that links stanzas 2 and 3 ("and slew my knight... He slew my

knight... He slew my knight”) stands out as artful, as do the reiterated rhetorical questions of stanza 6 (“But think na ye... O think na ye...”). The striking motif of the widow’s bearing the corpse on her back before she buries it (stanza 5) seems a precise (if rather grotesque) echo of the image of the faithful doe in the well-known seventeenth-century part-song “The Three Ravens” (Child 26). In another example of literary theme and variation, the poem’s bleak closing couplet (“Wi’ ae lock of his yellow hair...”) echoes two lines of another poem of Scott’s, one that in turn reads like a precise literary parody of “The Three Ravens.” This “anonymous” lyric, “The Twa Corbies,” includes the couplet “Wi’ ae lock o’ his gowden hair / We’ll theek our nest when it grows bare” (Scott 1802-3:338, lines 15-16).

But my main point here is with meter. Like any crafted poem, “The Lament of the Border Widow” can be scanned. In 28 lines I find only 3 departures from regular scansion, each time by the substitution of an anapest for an iamb (in line 1 and, twice, line 22). The unusual metrical form that Scott adopted—iambic tetrameter quatrains rhyming AABB—points unmistakably to his chief source, an English broadside ballad that enjoyed rather frequent reprinting under the title “The Famous Flower of Serving-Men.”

In June 1656 this song was entered in the Stationers Register to John Andrews, London, its authorship attributed to “L.P.”—presumably the broadside writer Laurence Price, whose career Dave Harker has reconstructed in some detail.<sup>8</sup> Reading this 28-stanza broadside ballad side-by-side with Scott’s poem offers an instructive lesson in literary taste. Absent from Scott’s “Lament” are the circumstantial details, the female ingenuity, the romance, the discovery, that make Price’s ballad a charming and slightly risqué song of love and adventure that served as the prototype of dozens of light broadside ballads on the theme of female cross-dressing. Instead, Scott presents a bleak landscape of treachery and violence brightened only by one woman’s heroic faith.

The broadside ballad scans, too. Price may have written for the streets, but like most of his colleagues in that trade, he had enough

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<sup>8</sup> Harker 1987. Price’s broadside became detached from his authorship soon after it appeared, going through numerous anonymous printings. To be precise, Scott probably first became familiar with it in the fancy-dress version that appeared in Percy’s *Reliques* (1765), a book that was a staple of his youth.

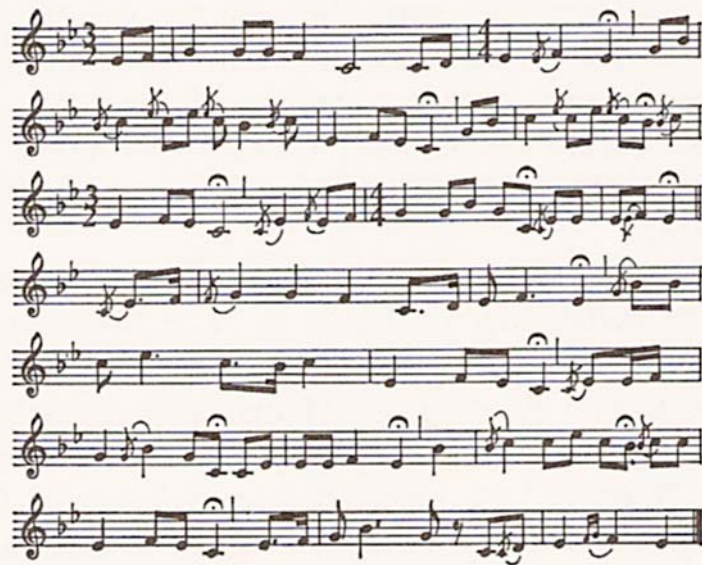


education to compose a correct bit of verse. When we turn to versions of this same ballad that have been collected from British singers in recent years, however, we enter a different world. These versions regularly derive from late printings of the English broadside ballad rather than from Scott's poem, and sometimes they show unmistakable signs of reworking in oral tradition. One example is the fragmentary version, part sung and the rest recounted, that the great Aberdeenshire singer Jeannie Robertson recorded for Hamish Henderson in 1954 (Bronson 1959-72:IV, 483-84):<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2. "The Famous Flower of Serving Men"

Archive, School of Scottish Studies, rec. No. 1954/103/Ar.  
Sung by Jeannie Robertson, Aberdeen; learned from her  
mother. Collected by Hamish Henderson. Transcribed by  
Francis M. Collinson.

m π<sup>1</sup>



My father built me a dandy bow'r  
Wi' some fine roses and some fine flow'rs.  
But my stepmother showed me her spite  
For she sent that robber for to slain that knight.

For to rob my bow'r and to slain that knight  
And they could not do me a greater harm  
Than to kill the baby

<sup>9</sup> For a portrait of Robertson as a tradition-bearer, see Gower 1968. Robertson's songs have been the subject of close analysis by Gower and Porter 1970, 1972, and 1977.

That lay in my arms.

And they left me nothing  
 For to roll it in  
 But the bloody sheets  
 That my love lay in.

She laid her haid down upon a block  
 And she cut off her golden locks,  
 And she changed her name from young Elleanor fair,  
 She changed it to young Willie Dare.

There is a good deal more substance to the plot as Robertson then proceeds to tell the remainder of the story (484), but my interest here is in that part that she sings. Only if you fit this text to its tune does its stanzaic structure make sense. What seems at first to be a major metrical shift in the middle of stanza 2 comes to appear unremarkable, for the six short lines of stanzas 2 and 3 function musically as three long lines. With equal justice, an editor printing this text could render it as four 4-line stanzas (as above); as three stanzas consisting of 4, 5, and then 4 lines respectively; or as 13 lines with no stanza breaks.

No matter which editorial choice one makes, the lines evidently reflect Robertson's indifference to textbook rules of scansion—even her unconsciousness of these rules, perhaps. Whereas "The Lament of the Border Widow" keeps to even octosyllabic lines and regular 4-line stanzas, Robertson's lines contain anywhere from 8 to 11 syllables, and their average length of 9.7 syllables is well above the norm in tetrameter poetry.<sup>10</sup>

In this kind of orally generated verse, as Linda Williamson has documented in a study based on extensive fieldwork in Scotland (1985), the terms "meter," "metrical variation," "line," and "stanza" cease to bear much meaning. No succession of metrical feet through regular stanzas can be traced, while rhyme (or off-rhyme) is incidental. Instead, what one finds is the steady advance of a basic rhythmic pulse in accord with a governing melodic idea.

Robertson's version of "The Famous Flower of Serving Men," unpolished as it is (for the song seems not to have been a regular part of her

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<sup>10</sup> For the sake of comparison here, I am counting each pair of short lines as a single long line.

repertory), represents something other than a freak performance. It serves as a fair example of what Scottish traditional narrative song can consist of before ballad editors get their hands on it. While the style of this particular song is characteristic of Robertson's specific subculture, that of the traveling people or "tinkers" of Aberdeen, it does not differ substantially from that of other versions of the song that have been recorded from traditional singers in Great Britain. Examples are the curious version that the Dorset gypsy queen Caroline Hughes sang to Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger in 1963 in ten stanzas of varying length (Bronson 1959-72:IV, 484-85)<sup>11</sup> and the version in seven flexible stanzas that Henderson recorded in 1958 from the singing of Martha Reid, a Perthshire woman of traveling stock (485-86).

There is much in these latter examples that will strike the educated reader as corrupt. Whether Hughes' or Reid's *listeners* would have considered the songs corrupt is another matter. Certainly a breakdown in scansion does not indicate a breakdown in sense. On the contrary, it often results from a singer's efforts to maintain the integrity of the narrative. In general, in reading these texts, it is essential to keep in mind a point that Gower and Porter have made with emphasis in relation to Jeannie Robertson's Child ballads: "what the ear accepts when a text is sung sometimes strikes the eye as an incongruity when the line is scanned on the printed page" (1970:35).

The main point to which my remarks lead is that *the primary medium of traditional singers is the voice, not the printed page*. The point may be obvious but it is essential to keep in mind. If songs from a living tradition do sometimes happen to be frozen into documents thanks to the efforts of collectors like Henderson, Williamson, MacColl, Seeger, Gower, and Porter, then these museum texts are the secondary reflex of an oral phenomenon. We should not be surprised if, stripped of their human context, these texts seem to us to lack coherence. As educated readers

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<sup>11</sup> For a transcription and discussion of a different performance of this song by Hughes, see MacColl and Seeger 1977:81-86. A recording of another performance by Hughes can be heard on *Classic Ballads*, vol. 2 (Child 85-215), ed. by Peter Kennedy, Folktracks Cassette FSB-90-502 (Totnes, Devon, n.d.). To judge from these examples as well as other recorded ones, Hughes must be counted one of the most freely recreative of English traditional singers. A collation of her performances, both words and tunes, makes one uneasy with the assumption that the mode of transmission of British balladry is uniformly memorial, as is accepted for example by Jabbour 1968.

separated in time and space from the song-culture in question, we can scarcely claim competence in the systems of verbal signification that singers and their audiences took for granted. In an oral context, listeners normally have no difficulty perfecting a song in their own mind. The song has been heard before. Its story is well known. Its strains may evoke powerful memories of family and friends, some of whom may no longer be living.<sup>12</sup> Only a few lines of a song, even the merest humming of its tune, can thus evoke powerful emotions on the part of people who associate the song with particular people or situations of the past and who have full competence in this culture's symbolic codes.

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With this much of a preface—"Now," said the Friar, "this is a long preamble of a tale!"—I would like to argue my main point: that in the absence of clear evidence indicating a work's learned provenance, editors of Old English texts should respect the metrical freedoms and disjunctions that they discover, honoring them as possible signs of a human voice.

There are at least five reasons why emendations *metri causa* should generally be avoided in the Anglo-Saxon context.

(1) An editor can only emend the text in accord with a compelling theory of Old English meter. To date, there are almost as many theories of Old English meter as there are scholars who have written on the subject.<sup>13</sup> Although some of these theories may seem more plausible than others, I can see no sure way to choose among them in the absence of an Anglo-Saxon singer whom we can hear perform.

(2) Even if a convincing theory of Old English meter could be derived from the extant poetic records, one would still have to show that

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<sup>12</sup> Williamson (1981) has made this point with regard to traditional storytelling, which often has the effect of calling up the ghost of a person from whom the teller learned the story or with whom the story is indelibly associated.

<sup>13</sup> For a review of early metrical theories and for justification of a comprehensive theory of his own, see Pope 1942. More recent approaches—for the most part mutually irreconcilable ones—include Bliss 1967, Cable 1974, Luecke 1978, Hoover 1985, Russom 1987, Creed 1990, and Kendall 1991. Hoyt Duggan sensibly suggests that "metrists should more steadily exercise skepticism about the manuscript readings on which they base their work and... should be less eager to account for *all* the data as metrical" (1988:162).

Anglo-Saxon poets composed self-consciously according to this system. No Anglo-Saxon *ars metrica* has come down to us, no *skáldscaparmál*. Most accounts of Old English meter are descriptive, not proscriptive, and they do not necessarily explain very much. As Donald Fry has remarked, “Try collocating two important stressed Old English words in a grammatical unit with alliteration rules satisfied and enough particles to yield four to eleven syllables; the result almost invariably fits one of Sievers’s five types” (1975:60). The question remains open as to whether the literary concept of meter, as opposed to the oral/aural principle of rhythm, had much meaning for poets working in the medium of vernacular verse.

(3) Emendations that are made *metri causa* eliminate poetic license by fiat. They can take no account of departures from the norm for special reasons or effect. If poets are not metrical automatons but poets, it seems presumptuous to remake them in our own metrical image and likeness.<sup>14</sup>

(4) One would expect a good theory of meter to account not only for normative alliterating two-stress verses, but also for those “orphan” verses (or isolated, non-alliterative half-lines) as well as those hypermetric verses (those with “extra” stressed and unstressed syllables) that abound in some texts. There is also the special problem of Ælfric’s rhythmic, alliterative prose—or is it poetry? As far as I am aware, no current theory of Old English poetic meter deals adequately with more than a percentage of the data. An argument can be made that no one theory should even attempt to do so; but since the beauty of a theory usually lies in its simplicity and comprehensiveness, the justification for any theory worthy of the name is thereby undermined.

(5) Metrical anomalies are almost the *sine qua non* of a text that is a faithful record of an oral performance. These anomalies tend to vanish like ghosts in the light of day when one turns from the printed page to a tape-recording of a singer or, better yet, to the singer herself. Even a singer who is musically and textually illiterate may have an effortless command of the art of fitting sung or spoken words into a seamless sequence that fulfills a given melodic idea. Metrical anomalies are a function of the process of text-making and text-reading, not the process of singing and listening.

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<sup>14</sup> Here I am paraphrasing from a personal communication of 6 August 1990 from J. R. Hall, whose articulation of this point seems to me forceful. I am also grateful to Professor Hall for calling several articles to my attention.

If these five points have merit, then there is no need to emend an Old English poetic text except in very limited circumstances, when a lacuna appears in the manuscript or when some obvious breakdown of sense has occurred.<sup>15</sup> I am advocating a conservative stance here not out of a blind respect for medieval scribes, whose efforts may not always deserve it (Sisam 1953; Moffat 1992), but rather out of regard for the singers or speakers the traces of whose words may linger in scribal records.

This conservative stance may gain some credibility if I review some instances where texts have been improved unnecessarily on metrical grounds. The specific examples come from *Beowulf*, a work that many people take to have a relation to oral tradition, but the point that I am making is a general one. For the sake of brevity, I will cite only the textual emendations in Klaeber's edition (henceforth K), comparing them with Zupitza's 1959 facsimile and transcription of the manuscript (henceforth Z), since K is the edition normally taught at the advanced level and cited in scholarly publications.<sup>16</sup>

A comparison of K and Z reveals 28 instances (some of them redundant) in which K emends although the manuscript reading is acceptable in both sense and syntax. The instances can be grouped into four categories.

- (1) Suppletion of a whole verse or addition of several verses to fill out the shape of a line or passage.
- (2) Supplementation of a word, a syllable, or several syllables to a verse for the sake of better alliteration and sometimes also better meter.
- (3) Substitution of one word or simplex for another for the sake of better alliteration.
- (4) Minor emendation for the sake of syllable-count.

Let me review each category in turn.

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<sup>15</sup> What is obvious to one reader may not be so to another, of course, and thus debate concerning the need for editorial interventions is bound to remain healthy.

<sup>16</sup> Quotations from the text of *Beowulf* are from Klaeber 1950, diacritics and italics omitted.

(1) *Suppletion of a whole verse or addition of several verses to fill out the shape of a line or passage* (3 instances). This is a standard editorial practice. Still, as several dissenters have argued, editors ought to give more weight than they have generally done to the possibility that an “orphan” verse may stand on its own if the demands of sense and syntax are met, particularly if its two main stressed syllables are linked by alliteration or if alliteration is carried over from the preceding line.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, a line that is adequate according to all criteria but alliteration may be allowed to stand. The first example from *Beowulf* falls at 403b. For the sake of clarity I will quote the verse in context. Having been granted leave to enter Heorot, Beowulf’s band of Geats are ushered into the hall by Wulfgar, Hrothgar’s chamberlain, a *wlonc hæled* “proud warrior” (331b):

Snyredon ætsomne, þa secg wisode,  
 under Heorotes hrof; [heaþorinc eode,]  
 heard under helme, þæt he on heo[r]ðe stod.  
 (402-4)

They hastened along together while the man guided them under the roof of Heorot; the warrior advanced, bold under his helmet, until he stood at the hearth.

There is no breakdown of sense or, for that matter, of rhythm or alliteration if one reads continuously from 403a to 404a, omitting the interpolated verse and changing the editorial semicolon to a comma. What one discovers is a pattern of rich alliteration whereby initial *h* links five stressed words in three successive verses.<sup>18</sup> Nothing is missing; there is a redundant *a*-verse.

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<sup>17</sup> Bliss 1971; Kiernan 1981:185-91. Foley (1980) draws on his field experience with South Slavic oral poetry to add to the strength of this argument. Moffat (1992:819-21), perhaps unaware of this comparative evidence, still finds reason to regard “orphan” verses as probable sites of corruption. Kiernan bases his argument on trust in the overall accuracy of the two *Beowulf* scribes. Whether or not this trust is misplaced, the point about free-standing half-lines may still have independent validity.

<sup>18</sup> See Kiernan 1981:189 for discussion. A similar phenomenon can be noted in lines 15-17 of *The Seafarer*:

[ic] ... winter wunade wreccan lastum,  
 winemægum bidroren,

Accepting K's incidental emendation of *heoð* (of uncertain meaning) to *heorð* 'hearth,' one can paraphrase the lines: "They hastened along together while the man, bold beneath his helm, guided them under Heorot's roof until he stood at the hearth."

Another instance of unnecessary whole-verse suppletion is at 2792b. Again I quote the verse in context. Wiglaf stands over the mortally wounded Beowulf, reviving him from the swoon into which he has fallen:

... He hine eft ongon  
 wæteres weorpan, oð þæt wordes ord  
 breosthord þurhbræc.  
 [Biorncynning spræc]  
 gomel on gιοhðe —gold sceawode—: ....  
 (2790-93)

... Again he began to cast water over him until the  
 first word of speech broke from his chest.  
 The king spoke, aged, in sorrow; he gazed on the  
 gold....

The verse supplied by K is superfluous, for Beowulf's ensuing speech is adequately introduced by 2790-92a. If one reads through from 2792a to 2793a, capitalizing "Gomel" and taking it as a substantive ("The old man") that serves as the subject of *sceawode*, while deleting the editorial dashes with which K sets off 2793b, the demands of sense are met. Line 2793 can be paraphrased: "The old man, sorrowing, gazed on the gold." One formula of direct speech has been introduced and no second one is necessary. The absence of an alliterating *b*-verse to respond to 2792a can be taken as signaling an appropriate dramatic pause. For a similar instance of the strategic use of a dramatic pause signaled by a half-line, one can refer to line 172 of *The Battle of Maldon*. This consists of a single orphan verse that refers to the mortally wounded Byrhtnoth: "He to heofonum wlat" (He

bihongen hrimicelum...(Krapp and Dobbie 1936:143)

[I] ... lived out the winter on paths of exile,  
 cut off from friendly kindred,  
 covered with ice and frost....

Here the rich alliteration is on *w*, and editors resist the temptation to emend.



looked up to heaven). Coming as it does just before Byrhtnoth's last words (173-80), the *Maldon* verse provides a fair analogue to the one from *Beowulf* and, to my mind, as artful an example of the uses of silence as can be found in English literature before Chaucer.

A third and more substantial emendation for the sake of alliteration occurs between verses 389a and 390b, in the standard lineation of the poem. Here Klaeber and other editors introduce two whole verses to supplement the sense and fill out the alliteration of two lines. Without the emendation, the passage reads as follows. Hrothgar is speaking to Wulfgar, granting Beowulf's men permission to enter the hall:

“... Gesaga him eac wordum, þæt hie sint wilcuman  
Deniga leodum.” Word inne ahead:  
“Eow het secgan sige dryhten min....”

“... Tell them more, say that they have come as welcome visitors to the people of the Danes.” He [Wulfgar] spoke to them within [the hall]: “My victorious lord commanded that you be told....”

While the transition between speakers is slightly abrupt, all demands of sense are met. The lines should stand unemended, as both Kiernan (1981:187) and Frantzen (1992:338-39) have argued.

(2) *Supplementation of a word, a syllable, or several syllables to a verse for the sake of better alliteration and sometimes also better meter* (6 instances). This practice of emendation will be sufficiently clear, I believe, if I simply list the verses in question, leaving the reader to pursue their reading context if necessary:

	K	Z
149b	forðam [secgum] wearð because [to men] it became	forðam wearð because it became
586b	no ic þæs [fela] gylpe not that I boast [much] of this	no ic þæs gylpe not that I boast of this
1329a	[æþeling] ærgod a preeminent nobleman	ærgod preeminent

2139a	in ðam [guð]sele in that [war]hall	in ðam sele in that hall
2525b	ac unc [furður] sceal but [in addition] it shall come about for the two of us	ac unc sceal but it shall come about for the two of us
2941b	[fuglum] to gamene for the amusement [of birds]	to gamene for amusement.

K's additions to these verses hinge on the faith that the *Beowulf* poet always maintained a prominent alliterative scheme and did not tolerate verses of fewer than four syllables; but the existence of these six verses can be taken as evidence for a contrary assumption, namely that the poet was sometimes content with good sense regardless of the normal pattern of alliteration and syllable-count. Nowhere is the manuscript reading defective in a prose sense (and we should bear in mind that all Old English poetry is written out as prose). Verse 1329a still satisfies the rules of alliteration if unemended, while the initial *g-* of *gamene* in 2941b could be taken as rich alliteration in conjunction with the two *g*-initial words of line 2940. Since verses 149b and 2525b, if unemended, lack substantives and are too light to function independently, each is probably best printed conjoined to 150a and 2526a, respectively, as a set of 3 syllables in anacrusis:

forðam wearð ylða bearnum undyrne cuþ (150, revised)  
because it became openly known to the sons of men

ac unc sceal weorðan æt wealle, swa unc wyrd geteoh (2526, revised)  
but the two of us will experience what fate devises at the wall

These editorial choices would leave the verses that are now printed as 149a and 2525a as orphan verses analogous to 2792a.

(3) *Substitution of one word or simplex for another for the sake of better alliteration* (14 instances). The most forthright examples of this editorial practice are K's emendations of *handgripe* 'handgrip' to *mundgripe* 'handgrip' (965a) and *hildplegan* 'battle play' to *lindplegan* 'lindenwood play' (1073b). In each instance the two nouns are virtual synonyms. While the emended readings restore correct alliteration for the lines, the manuscript readings may still be preferable. They point to a rough and ready quality in the poet's artistry that reveals itself in an

indifference to alliterative norms even when these norms could easily be satisfied. What counts is the sense, which here is bluntly expressed in the less poetic of the two synonyms. *Hand*, not *mund*, is the normal word for “hand.” *Hild* likewise is the prosaic word for “battle,” while *lind* denotes battle only metaphorically. Other examples of the same kind of editorial adjustment are *hilde gefeh* ‘rejoiced in battle’ (2298b), which K renders as *wiges gefeh* ‘rejoiced in war’; *heal hroden* ‘hall adorned’ (1151b), which K emends to *heal roden* ‘hall reddened’ so as to maintain the rule that alliteration on the fourth stressed syllable of the line is to be avoided, although the bitterly ironic phrasing whereby Finn’s hall is “decorated” with corpses is therefore lost; and *synsceaþa* ‘evil harmer’ (707a), which K gives as the more evocative *scynsceaþa* ‘demon harmer’ for the sake of more exact alliteration with *sceadu* (707b), even though *synsceaþa* makes good sense and is used of Grendel elsewhere in the poem (801b), while *scynsceaþa* is an unattested conjecture that should here be rejected (O’Keeffe 1981:485). While the line as unemended departs from the normal habits of alliteration in *Beowulf*, the poet as well as the scribe may have tolerated such liberty.

A special subtype of this kind of emendation consists of the change of *h*-initial words that are written out quite clearly in the manuscript, where they make good sense, to vowel-initial words. Instances are *æfter hæledum frægn* ‘he inquired about the heroes’ (332b), which K emends to *æfter æðelum frægn* ‘he inquired after their lineage’; *handlean* (1541b) and *hondlean* ‘hand-reward’ (2094b), which K gives as *andlean* and *ondlean* ‘reward,’ respectively; and *hondslyht* ‘blow delivered by hand’ (2929b and 2972b), which K changes to *ondslyht* ‘counterblow.’ As Taylor and Evans have argued, none of these emendations is necessary if one accepts that on occasion the poet allowed vowel-initial words to alliterate with words having initial aspiration.<sup>19</sup> Such collocations may have been his equivalent to the off-rhyme that is characteristic of Jeannie Robertson’s, Caroline Hughes’, or Martha Reid’s singing style, or indeed that can be heard in the recordings of virtually any singer (including contemporary pop and rap recording artists) whose primary audience consists of auditors, not readers of texts. The notorious change whereby the man whom the scribe four times names *Hunferð* (499a, 530b, 1165b, 1488a), with an emphatic capital

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor and Davis 1982; Bevis 1965:165. Nicholson holds that the alliterative patterns in these lines invite both *hond*- and *ond*- readings (1984:274-75).

*H* the first time the name appears, is renamed *Unferð*, a form that has been adopted in all current editions and in almost all commentary on the poem from the late nineteenth century until the 1980s, is an equivalent phenomenon. In this instance an intelligible and well-attested Anglo-Saxon proper name—one that in the context of this poem may carry somewhat sinister overtones, connoting “the one of Hunnish spirit”—is rendered into a name of debated meaning (“mar-peace”? “folly”?) or of no particular meaning at all.<sup>20</sup>

(4) *Minor emendation for the sake of syllable-count* (5 instances). Of first interest here are the following four verses:

	K		Z
652a	[Ge]grette þa Then he greeted		Grette þa Then he greeted
1404b	[swa] gegnum for [just as] he went straight on		gegnum for he went straight on
1546a	brad [ond] brunecg broad and shiny-edged		brad brun-ecg broad, shiny-edged
3124a	hilderinc[a] of warriors (gen. pl.)		hilderinc warrior (nom. sg.)

The same defense of these manuscript readings can be made as for the second group cited above. The rule that a verse requires a minimum of four syllables is a modern one, and there is no way to test for a consciousness of it on the part of Anglo-Saxon poets. Retention of *hilderinc* in 3124a requires that we construe the noun in apposition to the

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<sup>20</sup> Defenses of “Hunferð,” with differing justification, are offered by Nicholson 1975, Vaughan 1976, Kiernan 1981:188, Taylor and Davis 1982:619, and Dahlberg 1986. Kiernan also suggests retention of MS *handlean*, *hondlean*, and *hondslyht*, as does Vaughan 1976:39-40, n. 4. Vaughan’s postulate that the initial phoneme *h-* was lost in certain words in *Beowulf* that keep a conservative spelling is not confirmed by Scragg 1970 (see 176-79 for examples from *Beowulf*) but is inessential to the question of emendation. Nicholson 1984 suggests that there is deliberate ambiguity between the two significant names “Hunferth” and “Unferth.” For a full review of the controversy relating to the Danish *thyle*, see Fulk 1987. Not all readers will follow Fulk, however, in his suggestion that Unferth is an otherwise unattested character out of Germanic legendry.

pronoun *sum* ‘one’ in 3123a, referring to Wiglaf, whereas emendation to the genitive plural form *hilderinc[a]* requires construing it in apposition to *eahta* ‘of eight’ in the same verse, an inconsequential distinction. Retention of *brad brunecg* in 1546a would require insertion of an editorial comma between the two adjectives. There is precedent for this kind of verse elsewhere, specifically 2829a, *hearde heaðoscearpe* ‘hard, battle-sharp,’ and 2863a, which however K emends from *sec sarigferð* ‘sick, sad in spirit’ to *sec[g] sarigferð* ‘a sad-spirited man.’ Preferable to K’s readings for these two verses are Heyne-Schücking’s *hearde*, *heaðo-scearpe* and *sec*, *sarigferð*, respectively (Von Schaubert 1958:*ad loc.*).

Also falling into this category of emendation is 9b, *para ymbsittendra* ‘of those neighbors,’ which K curtails to *ymbsittendra* ‘of neighbors’ on the basis of an assumed rule that precludes anacrusis in this type of E-verse.<sup>21</sup> The rule should be considered to be of too uncertain authority to override the manuscript reading, which again is accepted in the Heyne-Schücking edition.

What is accomplished by this analysis?

Not being passionate on the subject of minor textual issues that do not affect our basic understanding of a poem like *Beowulf* one way or another, I am reluctant to work up a grandiloquent plea that my proposed non-emendations be adopted. I can enjoy an improved text as much as anyone else. But it has not been my primary intention to argue textual details. Many of these details have been discussed in more probing manner by E. G. Stanley, who for his own reasons arrives at conclusions much like the ones advocated here, while still reluctantly accepting the need for several emendations for the sake of alliteration.<sup>22</sup> What I am proposing is *a different way of reading Old English verse*, or of reading some Old English verse, at least: namely, as the textual record of a kind of literature that did

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<sup>21</sup> In an effort to eliminate anacrusis of this kind, Pope (1988) proposes emending *para* “of those” to *pær* “there,” while appending this adverb to the end of the preceding verse.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley (1984) is willing to accept emendation to *mundgripe* (965a), *lindplegan* (1073b), and *Unferð* (4 instances) and suspects loss of at least three verses at line 402. Distinguishing metrical emendations from alliterative ones, he affirms that “metrical anomalies . . . should, however, not be regarded as requiring editorial improvement unless the sense is deficient too” (250-51).

not need texts for its existence.

The manner in which this poetry carried itself in its primary medium of the human voice—the style, the rhetoric, the aesthetics of it—did not necessarily correspond to what we expect from the products of a highly educated hand. We look for a flawless text arranged in lines and half-lines on the page. What we find at times is metrically unkempt, in the manuscript version that underlies our critical editions. We look for inner consistency in a story. What we find at times is an additive style by which individual narrative passages have their own authority, almost independent of what is said elsewhere, as when the hero is said to have been considered a slack youth (2183b-88a) even though we hear of him in the Breca episode as having been a young man with an extraordinary propensity for action. We look for a poet sensitive to mistakes. What we find is one who at a critical moment of Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother curiously refers to his Geatish hero as *freca Scyldinga* 'lord of the Danes' (1563b), just as later on, an unnamed messenger refers to the time when Beowulf ruled over the *Scyldingas* 'the Danes' (3005b), not the Geats. Yet oddities like these—the first of which Klaeber lets stand, while the second one he corrects—can go unnoticed in an absorbed reading of the poem, just as they would have been unnoticed by a listener intent on what happens next in the narrative. And this absorbed reading or hearing of the poem is the better one; that is, the one that is closest to the spirit of *Beowulf* as an act of interpersonal communication.

What I recommend is that as readers of *Beowulf*, we approach it in two ways. First, we can take it as a textual document, one that unknown people saw fit to bring into existence to suit some kind of literary, political, or educational purpose. As we do so, we should use all our usual philological and literary expertise to make sense of it, guided by the recognition that when a work of oral literature is taken down in writing, it may acquire features of style that depart from those of oral performance. Second, and equally importantly, we can try to hear *Beowulf* as a poem. This means projecting ourselves into the vanished world of sound to so as to read through the text, not merely read it (Niles 1983). This is a difficult task. All our education cries out against it. Still it is one that is in accord with the primary agenda of what has recently been called the New Philology, which, in the words of Suzanne Fleischman, should aim to "recontextualize the texts as acts of communication, thereby acknowledging the extent to which linguistic structure is shaped by the pressures of

discourse” (1990:37). It is a task worth attempting if we are to hope to understand *Beowulf* not only in our own literate terms, but also in terms of its primary medium of spoken words—words in their ornamental splendor, words voiced by living people and heard by other people, all of whom formed parts of a community knit together, bound to their ancestors, and armed for life, by what in a more humble and convivial context (Dunn 1980) has felicitously been called the fellowship of song.

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