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Metrical Transcription as Scribal Performance
Reading Spaces in Eddic Poems and the Merseburg Charms

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The term *scribal performance* was coined to talk about variations and reworkings in medieval or ancient manuscripts that have been introduced through a scribe's tradition-based knowledge. Discussions of scribal performance have focused specifically on verbal variation (for an overview, see Ready 2019), which has limited the concept and its usage. The present paper reframes the concept in a way relevant to metrical studies. It brings into focus the phenomenon of *metrical transcription*, when a writer, transcriber or copyist of a text presents it in a way that makes the metrical structure visible, such as placing each metrical unit on its own line. Many poetries from the Middle Ages were written out as continuous text like prose. The meter had to be recognized in reading, for which punctuation was a potential aid, but use of word spacing, in focus here, has, to my knowledge, remained unrecognized.

In the following pages, word spacing in metrical transcription is briefly introduced through two cases. The Old High German Merseburg Charms are discussed as an example of spaces only being added between metrical units. This case shows that examining metrical transcription may contribute to both metrical and textual analysis. Seventeenth-century copies of Old Norse eddic poems are then discussed as an example of proportional spacing between metrical units. The latter example moves beyond the scope of what is customarily discussed scribal performance because of a gap of several centuries between the original writing of the poems and the copyists, who were at a remove from the earlier oral tradition. Nevertheless, these copyists varied and considerably elaborated the poems and even composed new ones. Their scribal performances illustrate that copyists may interpret the metrical form in alternative ways without necessarily altering the lexical surface of the text.

Scribal Performance

The term *scribal performance* emerged to address variations in medieval or ancient manuscripts that seem to be introduced by a scribe based on knowledge of the respective tradition. The concept builds on the application of performance theory to scribal acts, viewing scribes as performers in relation to their presumed audiences (for a review, see Ready 2019: 203–215). The phenomenon was brought into focus as an alternative and corrective to earlier dominant paradigms for thinking about

scribal activity (e.g. O'Keeffe 1990). The term *scribal performance* is often handled heuristically, merely for identifying the medieval or ancient scribe as an agent capable of affecting texts in the copying process. The concept of performance has been applied to medieval manuscripts in other ways (e.g. Leach 2017), but scribal performance remains tethered to manuscript copyists in certain historical cultural contexts with specific regard to verbal variation, sometimes extended to transcription or later cases (see Ready 2019: ch. 3). The variation produced by these scribes is viewed through different frameworks, such as Oral-Formulaic Theory (e.g. Doane 1994), but the discourse surrounding scribal performance has delimited what it is imagined to include and thereby constrained its theorization.

I approach scribal performance as the performance of a tradition of verbal art through writing, which is centrally observable in evidence of 'scribal' agency affecting the outcome of the writing process, whether in copying a written exemplar, transcribing an orally delivered exemplar or audio recording, or writing a text based on personal knowledge. I draw on Reuven Tsur's (1992) approach to performance, developed to address the reading of poetry, including a distinction between mental and vocal performance. Tsur stresses that poetry performance is always set off from other forms of language use, bringing the text into focus *as* poetry. Poetry can simply be read as aesthetically unmarked text, but then it will not be saliently recognizable as poetry. In other words, it would not be seen as a *poetry performance*. This distinction is comparable to that between performance and dictation in research on oral traditions (e.g. Ready 2019: ch. 3). The performance/dictation distinction actually differentiates an emblematic mode of presentation linked to respective performance contexts from other contexts in which the same tradition is presented in a less formalized way or linked to different aims, such as talking about the tradition, teaching it, or reciting it in a way that is easier for someone to write down. Nevertheless, dictation can also be considered a type of performance, as can the delivery of a written poem as though it were prose. Tsur's distinction between mental and vocal performance attends to the necessity of vocal performance to reduce all potential variation into a vocal utterance, whereas mental performance does not require a resolution of all possible alternative ways of articulating a verse; nevertheless, mental performance still 'performs' the text according to its poetic form. Important here is that Tsur provides an approach that allows a distinction between performance within a conventional mode and its respective rhythms as opposed to a mode that does not attend to the rhythms that characterize the text as poetry.

When analyzing medieval texts in terms of the different modalities, the distinctions remain very general. For poetic texts, the primary distinction concerns whether or not meter and its rhythm are salient, of which shifts

between poetic and non-poetic vocabulary and phraseology may be a complementary indicator. Distinctions also blur between the two categories, which a writer may shift between; it is also not necessarily possible to determine what is attributable to the particular writer and what has been copied from an exemplar, unless there is a substantial corpus of copies in which to contextualize variations. These ambiguities do not eliminate the relevance of or interest in metrical transcription and the information it may reveal about a poetic meter, its interpretation or variations.

'Words' of Verse in the Old High German Merseburg Charms

My interest in metrical transcription began more than a decade ago with a study of the Old High German Second Merseburg Charm.[*] The two Merseburg Charms were added to a blank leaf of Merseburger Domstiftsbibliothek Hs. 136 in the tenth century. My initial concern was the name "Phol", which begins the charm in the short line *Phol ende Wodan* ['Phol and Wodan']. Alternative readings had been proposed based on an interpretation of the conjunction *ende* ['and'] or its first letters as part of the same word as "Phol", forming a word such as **Pholen* ['foal'] or **Pholende* ['foaling' or 'demon'] (see Hoptman 1999: 90–91; Edwards 2002: 99). When assessing these readings, I turned to the manuscript, where the words are written "Pʰol endeuuodan" and thus seemed inconsistent with such interpretations. On closer inspection, I noticed that spaces throughout the Second Merseburg Charm are not between words as linguistic signs as commonly distinguished today, but rather that spaces were regular at line breaks and caesurae. Not including breaks at the end of manuscript lines, there was never more than one space within an a-line or b-line (i.e. the short lines on either side of a caesura within a long line), and breaks within these short lines were always somewhere between its two strong positions. This pattern led to an interpretation that breaks in writing were between metrical lines and feet – i.e. the charm was transcribed according to metrical rather than lexical units (Frog forthcoming). I was particularly struck by this because I had previously presumed that lines like *Phol ende Wodan* had a trochaic rhythm of Sw/Sw (cf. Russom 2017: 56), whereas spacing suggests a rhythm of S/wSw.

The metrical transcription of these charms is here illustrated through the First Merseburg Charm. The Old Germanic long line has an accentual meter with four strong positions, two in each hemistich or short line – the a-line and the b-line, separated by a mandatory caesura. Within each short line, the two strong positions are customarily accompanied by additional syllables and words forming two weak positions. The organization of

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[*] This paper was written in 2010, presented at an organized session at the international medieval congress in Kalamazoo, but the book has faced repeated delays and remains forthcoming.

strong and weak positions within a short line varies considerably, but one or both strong positions in the a-line should alliterate with the first but not the second strong position in the b-line. In conventional layout, the First Merseburg Charm customarily appears (the large space indicates the caesura between the a-line and b-line; an asterisk indicates a conjectural interpretation considered below):

Eiris sazun idisi   sazun hera duoder (*or*: heraduoder)
suma hapt heptidun   suma heri lezidun
suma clubodun   umbi cuoniouuidi
insprinc haptbandun   inuar uigandun

Once sat *idisi*   sat *here and there (*or*: sat *on warbands)
some fettered the captured   some inhibited armies
some severed   around sharp bonds
spring free of fetter-bonds   escape the enemies

If the manuscript word spacing is retained, marking the three line breaks in the manuscript with '|', and placing a-lines and b-lines in columns for easier visual scanning, the text appears:

Eırıſ ſazun ıdıſı   ſazunhera duoder
ſuma|-hapt heptıdun   ſumaherılezıdun
ſumaclu|bodun   umbıcuonıo uuidı
ınſprınc hapt|-bandun   ınuaruıgandum .H.

The first line break is between "suma" and "hapt" in the second a-line, the second is within "clubodun", and the third is between the lexemes of the compound "hapt-bandun" in the final a-line. The first a-line is written in lexico-semantic units as commonly found in editions. After this, b-lines are clearly written as a solid unit of text or two such units; when written as two units, each unit has one metrically strong position each. The second and fourth a-lines are formally ambiguous because of where the line-break falls, but the third a-line is written as a single unit. In the b-line *umbi cuoniouuidi*, the first element of the compound, *cuonio-*, carries the alliteration and fills the strong position of the first foot. In the transcription, "umbıcuonıo uuidı", this element is written with the preposition and *-uuidi*, which forms the second foot, is written as a discreet unit. Following the opening a-line, the pattern of line spacing remains systematic through the Second Merseburg Charm: spaces always appear before and after each short line, each of which has a maximum of one space, which is always between metrically strong positions. Within the context of the two charms, the line breaks between "suma" and "hapt" and between "hapt-" and "bandun" at the ends of lines can be considered accidental.

The spacing in the first long line deviates from the pattern of other short lines. The a-line presents spaces between semantic units, which suggests that the transcriber or copyist began by spacing lexical units and rapidly shifted to writing in metrical units. The common sense of terms for 'word'

in most societies today is an abstracted unit of the lexicon linked to principles of grammatical analysis. If the term has not been borrowed into the language, however, it has normally had, as in Germanic languages, a vernacular sense of 'unit of utterance'. John Miles Foley (e.g. 1996; 2002) has advocated approaching oral poetry through these vernacular 'words' as units of utterance, such as formulaic phrases. In the Old Norse language, the term *vísuorð* ['poetic line', literally 'word of verse'] shows that the vernacular concept of 'word' applied to metrical units of utterance in at least some Germanic languages. The correlation of spaced units with metrical units in the Merseburg Charms suggests that the writer was mentally performing the charms in corresponding metrical 'words'.

Recognition of the pattern allows the visible rhythms to be turned back to metrical analysis. The Second Merseburg Charm has an uneven number of short lines owing to its usage of parallelism, with two groups of three parallel short lines, of which the second but not the first is followed by a single short line that concludes the series and the charm (i.e. 3 + 3 + 1 = 7). Nothing appears to have been omitted, and the irregular number makes it clear that the parallel short lines do not form a simple series of a-line + b-line pairs. The first parallel group is written with a consistent absence of spacing within the lines, and the second is consistently written with a space following the first noun, and the concluding short line lacks a space. Jonathan Roper (2011) observes that the meter of Old Germanic incantations is varies slightly from that of epic, and Clive Tolley (2021) draws attention to metrical variation linked to parallelism and lexical repetition in these charm traditions. Outside of parallel groups, spaces within a short line occur in a-lines and b-lines lack such spacing. Within parallel groups, the presence or absence of spacing can be interpreted as reflecting the repetition of the rhythm of the preceding parallel unit. This would contradict the conventional interpretation that the short lines are regularly organized in a-line + b-line pairs – an organization which is impossible for the first parallel group in the Second Merseburg charm. When the lack of spacing in this first parallel group is interpreted as a repetition of the b-line rhythm, the repetition of the second group with spaces becomes interpretable as an a-line rhythm, followed by a final b-line that concludes the charm. This interpretation identifies a-line rhythms as consistently presented with a space in the short line while b-line rhythms are presented with a lack of such spaces. The parallel group in the second and third long lines of the First Merseburg Charm can be viewed against this pattern. The lack of spaces in the first part of the third long line would then reflect a repetition of the b-line rhythm of the preceding parallel member, while the space in the following short line would suggest an a-line rhythm, as reflected in the following layout:

Eırıʃ ʃazun ıdıʃı   ʃazunhera duoder
ʃuma|-hapt heptıdun   ʃumaherılezıdun
    ʃumaclu|bodun

umbıcuonıo uuidı
ınʃprınc hapt|-bandun   ınuaruıgandum .H.

If this reading is correct, the first a-line appears to be written out as lexico-semantic units, while the second is written in metrical feet, after which a-lines are each written out as two 'words' corresponding to metrical feet and b-lines are written out as single 'words'. The pattern in b-line transcription would then suggest that the second foot in b-lines is systematically weaker than that in a-lines, which would account for not transcribing a space before the final foot, just as a space is not written between words in strong and weak positions within a foot.

In the first long line of the First Merseburg Charm, the space in the b-line might reflect a stage in the writer transitioning into the visible rhythm, but it might also reflect a perceived emphasis on the final foot that differs from other b-lines. A perceived emphasis could be accounted for on the condition that the *i-* in *idisi* is an unstressed affix, which is at least possible for this word (Kroonen 2013: 114–115 and see also 96–97). Primary alliteration would then be scanned as on *idisi* and *duoder* rather than on the repeating verb *sazun*. The line is itself difficult since reading it as either *hera duoder*, expressing a relation to locations, or as *heraduoder*, meaning 'warband', involves *hapax legomena* (Beck 2003: 30). Although alliteration on the final foot would seem non-ideal in epic, such lines occur and this may have been more acceptable in charms. Although conjectural, this scansion would account for the space in the b-line as a metrically motivated variation in rhythm rather than as a transposition of a-line and b-line rhythms as in the third long line, connected to parallelism. In this case, the word spacing only supports the question as a potential indicator of performance rhythm. If the space does reflect the rhythm of feet, however, *hera* belongs to the first foot with *sazun*, which alliterates and carries metrical stress. In this case, interpretation as a compound *heraduoder* must be rejected, because the second element of a compound is weaker than the first in Old Germanic poetries while the transcription would suggest that the second element here would have greater stress.

The interpretation of the space in the first b-line remains conjectural, as does the interpretation of spaces within lines as otherwise regularly reflecting a-line and b-line rhythms. Nevertheless, the case is illustrative of several relevant points. First, it shows that rhythms may be encoded in the written transcription of poems through the use of word spacing. Second, it provides an example of how encoded rhythms can be interpreted as reflecting the mental or vocal performance of the writer or copyist as scribal performance (even if, in principle, spacing could have

been copied from an exemplar). Third, even if alliteration on *idisi* and *duoder* is rejected, the example shows how close reading of word spacing may offer indicators of how to interpret the lexical surface of a line. Finally, whatever the verdict on the theory that a space or its lack in subsequent lines reflects conventional a-line and b-line rhythms, respectively, the case shows that close reading of word spacing may offer information about metrical structure and rhythms of a meter in performance.

Relative Spacing and Metrical Rhythms in Eddic Poems
Eddic poems were written down in Iceland especially in the thirteenth century. The collection in the Codex Regius manuscript (GKS 2365) was 'discovered' in the 1640s during heritage construction projects in Scandinavia. A boom in copying then occurred long after the poems had dropped out of oral circulation. The copyists were Icelanders, who could still interpret the language of the texts, and at least some copyists likely read the texts through knowledge of contemporary forms of the basic Old Germanic meter, inherited through its Old Norse form known as *fornyrðislag*. Old Norse poetry had, however, been innovative with regard to meter, producing additional forms such as what is called *ljóðaháttr*, characterized by an alternation between Germanic long lines and what are called in German *Vollzeilen* ['full lines'] (the German term is retained here to reduce confusion with other line-terms). *Ljóðaháttr*'s long lines exhibit greater metrical flexibility and subtle differences in rhythm from those of *fornyrðislag*, whereas a *Vollzeile* is shorter, lacks a caesura and has alliteration on any two of its two to three strong positions.

The seventeenth-century copyists of medieval eddic poems generally wrote out words with spaces between lexical units. Punctuation was not used regularly, but when it was used in verse, copyists always placed it at a line boundary. Sometimes poems or quotations from them were written out with each long line or short line and *Vollzeile* as a new line on the manuscript page, but most followed the medieval manuscripts' transcription of the texts as prose. In the Codex Regius, punctuation is commonly between line groups and a slightly larger space often appears between punctuation and a capital at the beginning of a so-called strophe or stanza. The seventeenth-century scribes also used such spaces, but most often in a much more pronounced way, leaving gaps in the text that, in a medieval manuscript, might be used for rubrics, or they simply began the new line group as a new, indented paragraph. In the seventeenth-century copies, relative spacing is also used, consciously or unconsciously, to indicate metrical units of utterance, showing certain words as belonging to one metrical unit in contrast to preceding and following units. This is illustrated in the following example from the manuscript Lbs 1562 4to, where metrical transcription is relatively

common. Although metrical transcription in Lbs 1562 4to varies between being extremely pronounced and very subtle, a reader is made more sensitive to it because spaces between stanzas are less pronounced and spaces between lines within a line group may appear equally large.

Figure 1 shows a manuscript image of the list of names in the poem *Grímnismál* identified in editions as stanza 47. In this stanza, the alternation between long lines and *Vollzeilen* was not regular: the first long line is followed by a *Vollzeile*, but the second is followed by another long line rather than a second *Vollzeile*. A proportionately larger space appears following each short line and the *Vollzeile*, with two exceptions: the space is not larger between the first b-line and the *Vollzeile* and a larger space is invisible following the second long line, where this corresponds to the end of the second manuscript line in Figure 1.
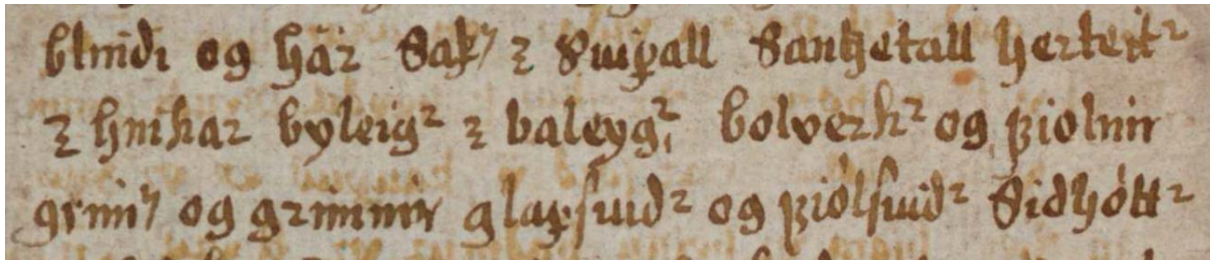

Figure 1. Lbs 1562 4to, 42v (image reproduced from Handrit.is); the passage begins with the fourth orthographic word in the first line.

In the following transcription, lines have been laid out according to editorial convention with a greater space between the a-line and b-line within a long line and the *Vollzeile* is indented. Proportionately larger spaces are indicated by '[/]' and manuscript line breaks by '|'. The sign used for *og* ['and'] has been expanded in italic font; superscript 'ʳ' is shorthand indicating the omission of a (usually preceding) vowel.

Saþ^r *og* Suipall [/]   Sanꞁgetall
    herteit^r | *og* hnikar [/]
byleig^r *og* baleyg^r, [/]   bolverk^r og fiolnir |
grim^r og grimnir [/]   glapſuıd^r og fiólſuid^r

Saður and Svipall   and Sanngetall
    Herteitur and Hnikar
Byleigur and Baleygur   Bölverkur and Fjölnir
Grímur and Grímnir   Glapsviður and Fjölsviður

The use of this spacing technique fluctuates through this manuscript, and also in others, with such rhythms in transcription already observable in passages of the Codex Regius.

In the seventeenth-century manuscripts, metrical transcription is particularly interesting because it can reveal copyists' attempts to make sense of the meter in ways that contravene currently accepted scansion. In the medieval manuscripts, scribes sometimes used an extended abbreviation technique: where an opening formula or formula series

repeated, they would save space by reproducing only the first letter of words. These abbreviations often only include words from the first long line in a sequence and sometimes of only the first a-line. Seventeenth-century scribes normally only reproduced the abbreviations or only expanded those lines of which words had been abbreviated. In the passage in Figure 2, labelled as stanza 32 of the poem *Vafþrúðnismál* in editions, abbreviation in the Codex Regius stopped in the opening long line and later copyists did not reproduce the following *Vollzeile*. In the second long line, a scribe also omitted the first letter of the word *baldni* ['bold'], changing it to *aldni* ['old']; this omission is common in seventeenth-century copies and Lbs 1562 4to has reproduced it from its exemplar. The change from *baldni* to *aldni* turned the uniquely attested phrase into a conventional formula, but it disrupted the b-alliteration that linked the a-line and b-line across the caesura, replacing it with vocalic alliteration inside the b-line (in Old Germanic poetries, all words beginning with a vowel alliterate with one another). The copyist of Lbs 1562 4to then presents a remarkably pronounced space in the middle of what is conventionally scanned as a *Vollzeile*. The space divides the *Vollzeile* into two parts like a long line, with an alliteration interpretable in each part, although the text remains lexically unchanged: *er hann hafðit* [/] *gýgjar gaman* ['when he hadn't [any] [/] fun with giantesses']. However, Old Germanic meters were organized according to phrasal stress, so metrical stress in the *Vollzeile* is unambiguously on the pair of nouns *gýgjar gaman*, whereas the verb *hafðit* is clearly weak, as is the pronoun *hann*, and the meter would only allow a single strong position between them.
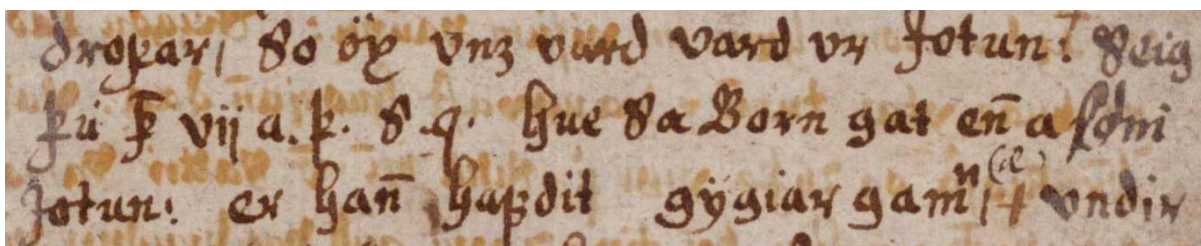

Figure 2. Lbs 1562 4to, 41r (image reproduced from Handrit.is); Vm 32, which begins with the last orthographic word in the first line.

Seig | þú þ̄ vij   a. þ. [/?] s.q. [/]
hue sa Born gat [/?]   eñ *aldni | jótún: [/]
er hañ hafdit [/]   gÿgiar gam$^{\text{n}}$/

Tell me this seventh [thing]   as you are called wise
how he got children   that old giant
when he hadn't [any]   fun with giantesses

* The space in "a ldni" is transparently linked to some sort of error. The copyist seems to have written "a" as a preposition á ['on, at'] and begun writing a following word beginning with an "f", over which the "l" is a correction, and perhaps a second letter, over which the "d" was written. Theere is no proximate passage in which a phrase á s… occurs, so this does not look like the copyist's eye simply looked back to the wrong place on the exemplar's page.

Reinterpretations of a *Vollzeile* are also found in other passages. In the example in Figure 1 above, the lack of a larger space before the *Vollzeile* could also reflect the interpretation of the *Vollzeile* and the name preceding it as together forming the b-line.

The scribal performance of the passage in Figure 2 and the potential interpretation of the *Vollzeile* in Figure 1 as a continuation of the b-line might appear disconnected from the Old Norse meter. However, the *ljóðaháttr* meter seems to have largely dropped out of use by the seventeenth century (cf. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2013: 15),[†] so perhaps most copyists would have needed to learn the meter's multiple line types from the written medieval poems. The greater flexibility of this meter's long lines and frequency of alliteration only on the final two words of *Vollzeilen* could easily lead to reading poems as composed in a flexible variation of *fornyrðislag* that allows irregular numbers of short lines and long lines with alliteration in only one short line. The word spacing suggests that the copyist of Lbs 1562 4to read the passage above in this way. In the present context, the case is interesting because spacing between words appears to reflect rhythms of mental or vocal performance in reading that are inconsistent with the medieval and current scansion of lines.

Overview

During the past several years, there has been a call to return to the manuscripts of medieval texts rather than relying only on the readings of current editions (e.g. Quinn 2016). Interest in scribal performance also seems to be on the climb (e.g. Ready 2019). In both cases, however, focus has remained on the lexical makeup of texts. The aim here has been to bring attention to features of manuscripts that tend to be ignored, such as spacing between words, and to reveal that, when scribal performance is approached through Tsur's concepts of mental and vocal performance in reading, features such as punctuation and spacing can be interpreted in terms of metrical transcription. The interpretation of spaces proposed here is based on contrasts, which are proportionate in the case of eddic poetry, and based on presence versus absence in the Merseburg Charms. The examples presented here are few, but they illustrate a variety of potential for this type of analysis, noting that analyses of metrical transcription may feel much more confident where verses are regularly punctuated at line ends. The examples show the potential of metrical transcription to shed light on alternative readings of the linguistic text, to reveal potential metrical variation not immediately visible from the linguistic text, and to

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[†] The Bragi database currently has only medieval poems and texts composed in the nineteenth century indexed under this meter (https://bragi.arnastofnun.is/bragarhattur.php?BID=77880 accessed 28 March 2022).

reveal scribal performances of one meter through the model of another or through some other interpretation of a poetic form.

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