

The Old English Rhyming Poem: Dialect Reconstruction and Metrical Type

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0 Introduction

If rhymes of the Old English period are treated, the example *par excellence* is naturally the *Rhyming Poem*. It is the only one about which we can say with any assurance that it was meant to feature rhymes in addition to the traditional alliterative patterns. The poem, which is described as ‘*tour the force*’ by Greenfield (1966), is supposed to be an experiment with a form otherwise unusual in the poetic output of the period. Probably it originates—as so many of the poems of the period—in Mercia. The poem came down to us in the *Exeter Book*, a 10th c. collection of Old English poetry.

0.1 In contrast to the short excerpt of *Elene*, and the poems with rhymes in various texts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the *Rhyming Poem* has a special pattern in which there is usually a batch of four internal rhymes occurring in two consecutive lines featuring the same phonetic pattern, though it has not been carried out throughout the poem:

lines 7: wicg ofer wongum wennan gongum
 8: lisse mid longum leoma getongum

0.2 The rhymes generally represent pure rhymes, *i.e.* from the stressed vowel on all the vowels and consonants are the same, thus only the (eventual) initial consonant may vary. The poem has 87 lines, of which one is faulty: the second part of line 35 is missing, and line 18 is so corrupted that not even the shadow of a rhyme has remained (for suggested amendments see Section 5), leaving thus 85 rhyme pairs.

0.3 The rhymes themselves can be single (there are 19 such pairs representing 22.35%), *e.g.*:

line 72: flean flesce mæg þonne flanhred dæg

double rhymes, however, are more frequent (37 pairs representing 43.53%), *e.g.*:

line 3: Glæd wæs ic gliwum glenged hiwum

and treble rhymes also occur (13 pairs, 13.68%), *e.g.*:

line 33: mod mægnade myne fægnade

0.4 This leaves 16 lines (15.29%) which do not correspond to the above patterns. (Some of these will represent more than one problem).

0.4.1 There are six pairs which could be explained as assonance (for the second vowel of line 64 see **5.2**):

lines 36: gold gearwade gim hwearfade
 58: steapum eatole misþah ond eal stund genag
 60: ond hetes henteð hæleðe scyndeð
 64: wræcfæc wriþað wraþ að smiteð
 75: þonne lichoma ligeð lima wrym friteð
 79: balawun her gehloten. Ne biþ se hlisa adroren

There have been, however, amendments suggested for some of the above lines with the intent to reconstruct pure rhymes (see Section 5), which incidentally do not concern with the final consonants of the rhyme pair in line 58.

0.4.2 Another instance seems to represent slanting rhyme, where the stressed vowels correspond in two features and differ in one:

line 73: nydrapum nimeð þonne seo neaht becymeð

where both vowels are front high, but have a contrast of rounded /y/ *vs.* unrounded /i/.

0.5 All the rest of the 11 rhyme pairs can be explained by the use of an alternate form (Section 1), by the dialectal difference between the Anglian original and the West Saxon of the copy (Section 2); or need to be amended to form proper rhymes. Though these examples are based on guess work, they offer an interesting attempt at the reconstruction of the earlier state of the lines (Section 5).

1 Rhyme reconstruction by alternative forms

Line 4: blissa bleoum blostma hiwum

Here, the original may have older **bliwum* (plur. dat. of *bliu*), the extant MS has the later development: **bliu* > *blio* > *bleo*.

Line 30: burgsele beofode beorht hlifade

Class 2 weak verbs frequently show forms with back mutation: *bifode* > *biofode* > *beofode*. The original probably had the unmutated form. Another distortion is caused by the use of the alternate ⟨a⟩ in the second syllable of a Class 2 weak verb.

Line 66: gromtorn græfeð græft hafað

Habban was one of the remnants of earlier Class 3 weak verbs. In Anglian texts the usual form of the Present Indicative 3Sg. was *hæfeð*. Later the form often appeared as *hafað* under the influence of Class 2 weak verbs, appearing both in later Anglian and West Saxon texts, though the usual form in West Saxon was *hæfð*.

2 Dialect “translation” from Anglian into West Saxon*

2.1 Rhyme reconstruction

2.1.1 The OE /æ(ɪ)/ and /e(ɪ)/ monophthong is Anglian, but it is /ea/ in West Saxon, as in

lines 25: ac wæs gefest gear gellende sner
 38: From ic wæs in frætwum freolic geatwum
 70: Me þæt wyrd gewæf ond gewyrht forgeaf

All six rhyme words have OE /æ(ɪ)/ (< Gmc. /a(ɪ)/. In the West Saxon dialect palatalized /g/ (> [j]) diphthongized the following palatal vowel. Thus in this dialect /æ(ɪ)/ is realized as /ea(ɪ)/. In the case of

lines 60: ond hetes henteð hæleðe scyndeð
 84: scyldum biscyrede scyndan generede

the ⟨y⟩ forms represent West Saxon /ie/ < /e/ which was due to the palatal diphthongizing affect of the initial /sk/.

2.1.2 Dialectal difference in the realization of the *i*-mutation of diphthongs:

line 45: se ær in dæge wæs dyre. Scriþeð nu deop feor(e)

Deore was a *-ja*-stem Adjective, where the /j/ element caused *i*-mutation, realized as /ie/ (> ⟨y ~ i⟩ in later texts) in West Saxon, but the diphthong remained unchanged in the Anglian dialects. Similarly, *scieran* and *sciendan* was the old West Saxon form of the verb, with *i*-mutation of OE /ea/, which was /e/ in the Anglian dialects.

2.1.3 OE /æɪ/ was preserved as a low front vowel in West Saxon, but had been raised to /eɪ/ in the Anglian dialects, as in

line 6: feorhgiefe gefegon frætwed wægon

The first rhyme word has OE /eɪ/, the usual vowel in the Past Sg. and Past Pl. stems of Reduplicating Class 1 (or Strong Class 7) verbs. *Wegon* is a Strong Class 5 verb, where the stem vowel in Past Pl. is /æɪ/. In the non-West Saxon dialects we find ⟨e⟩ in such instances. (See also the second word of the rhyme pair in line 25 above.)

2.1.4 Breaking (*vs.* smoothing), as in

line 9: þa wæs wæstmum aweaht world onspreht

is regular in West Saxon before *-h(t)*, while in the Anglian dialects we frequently find ⟨e⟩ in such a position. The distorted line is the result of faulty dialect translation, where only one of the words were re-spelled to conform West Saxon.

2.2 There are forms showing West Saxon characteristics throughout in the poem. In the list below all the examples have been collected, disregarding their eventual discussion in **2.1**. The descriptions are, however, the same as in the section above.

2.2.1 As explained in **2.1.3** above, OE /æɪ/ (< Gmc. /aɪ/) was preserved as a front low vowel in West Saxon. In addition to the examples found in rhymes, there are some further tokens: *wægon* 6, *rædmægne* 10, *sæge* 17, *mægen* 18, *wær* 26, *wæron* 27, *blæd* 35, 53.

2.2.2 The characteristic West Saxon palatal diphthongization discussed in **2.1.1** appears in the following tokens: OE /e/: *feorhgiefe* 6, *hyhtgiefu* 21, *giestas* 11; OE /æ/: *gear* 25, *gearwade* 36, *geatwum* 38, *forgeaf* 70; and also after /sk/: *scealcas* 27.

2.2.3 Breaking of OE /æ(ɪ)/ before final /h/: *neah* 44, *fleah* 44; /h/+C: *aweahrt* 9, *areaht* 9, *oferpeaht* 10.

2.2.4 The sequence /eah/ > /ih/ in later West Saxon: *hyhtgiefu* 21, *hygedryht* 21, *hyhtlic* 39, *flyhtum* 47, *niht* 44, *nyhstan* 78, *hyhtlice* 83.

2.2.5 In the West Saxon dialect the breaking of OE /æ/ is regular before /ll/: *healle* 15, *eall* 58, *fealleð* 68, *wealleð* 68; /l/+C: *steald* 22, *ealdorstol* 23, *ealdeð* 69.

2.2.6 The *i*-mutation of original OE diphthongs, or the development of Breaking is realized as ⟨ie⟩ > ⟨y⟩ in West Saxon: *nydbysgum* 44, *nydgrap* 73, *dyre* 45, *yrneð* 50, *scyrede* 84.

3 Preserved characteristic Anglian forms in the text

It is not only the distorted rhymes which indicate the Anglian connections of the poem. Beside the fairly extensive translation into West Saxon some Anglian forms had still been left unchanged. These examples, however, occurring in the body of the lines did not cause metrical difficulties.

3.1 Individual lexical elements

3.1.1 In the Anglian dialects OE /æɪ/ was raised and represented as ⟨e⟩: *segon* 5, *alegon* 5:

line 5: *secgas mec segon* *symbol ne alegon*

which means that only one pair of rhymes were distorted by replacing the West Saxon form of the Past Pl. of a Strong Class 5. In the Anglian original /eɪ/ of a Strong (Reduplicating) Class 7 Past Tense form formed a pure rhyme with the corresponding Past Pl. of another class of verb, and the fourth member of the rhymes: *sner* 25:

line 25: *ac wæs geffest gear* *gellende sner*

3.1.2 Palatalized consonants (/g/, /k/ and /sk/) had no influence on the following palatal vowel, thus the monophthongs were preserved: *gescad* 13, *gellende* 25, *bescær* 26.

3.1.3 Before /ll/ and /l/+C Anglian dialects preferred retraction of OE /æ/ to /a/: *galdor-wordum* 24, *ald* 63.

3.1.4 Before final /h/ and /h/+C Anglian dialects show a smoothing of the vowel: *onspreht* 9.

3.1.5 The *i*-mutated form of Anglian diphthongs are either a monophthong in the case of OE /ea(ɪ)/: *neda* 78; or an unchanged diphthong for OE /eo(ɪ)/ (no example in the text).

3.2 Morphological forms

There were also differences in the realization of the grammatical markers between West Saxon and non-West Saxon dialects.

3.2.1 The Gmc. marker of Present Indicative 3Sg. was *-iþ*. The vowel element had a tendency towards a levelling to ⟨e⟩ and/or syncope. According to the evidence of texts, syncope was carried out almost completely in West Saxon, whereas the Anglian texts show the preservation of the vowel element. There are 29 examples for *-eð* as the Present Indicative 3Sg. marker in the poem, with only one change in the case of *hafað* 66. (Of four more instances of the same verb marker see 4.1).

4 Variant forms due to successive copying

There is some evidence that the poem had been copied several times in its original Anglian dialect before it was translated into West Saxon, and these pieces of evidence also indicate an early date for the composition of the poem.

4.1 In the earliest Old English texts there were ⟨i, e, æ⟩ representing the vowels of unstressed syllables. Later MSS show a generalized form ⟨e⟩ for all the earlier vowel contrasts. Thus it may be assumed that ⟨i⟩ in some of the forms of the *Rhyming Poem* indicate an early date of the composition, the ⟨e⟩ forms can be ascribed to later scribes who replaced archaic forms with those of their own times. Since copying had never been perfect, neither was “translation” according to time or dialect, some archaic forms had been left in the text and were preserved by the last copyist of the poem too.

4.1.1 In four instances the old *-ið* form of the Present Indicative 3Sg. has been preserved (in contrast to the 29 examples with *-eð*): *sinnið* 52, *cinnið* 52, *blinnið* 53, *linnið* 53. All four examples occur in one quatrain, representing Strong Class 3 verbs.

4.2 The adverb *bi* originally had a long vowel, which it has preserved up to Present-Day English: [bai] < ME [bi:] < OE [bi:]. If it was used as a prefix, the vowel length remained in a prefixed noun (as *e.g.* in Present-Day English *by-word*), but it became unstressed if attached to a verb. This also meant a reduction in its quantity, which had no indication at first in

the written form. Later, however, it appears as ⟨e⟩, as all the earlier short front vowels in unstressed syllables. Thus we can presume a short [i] in the examples *biglad* 14, *biwiredon* 20, 85, *biscyrede* 84, representing an early stage of the development. There are some instances of the later ⟨e⟩ stage of the verbal prefix too in the text: *befeold* 21, *bescær* 26, *becuman* 73.

5 Destroyed rhymes reconstructed

Some of the rhymes are so uneven in their present form that it is greatly possible that they are the result of faulty scribal work. The reconstruction of such pairs was attempted on the basis of both pure rhymes and also the words/forms which were suggested as replacement were mostly such which had a similar meaning to the ones in the text, on the assumption that the destruction of the rhymes could be due to copying according to meaning instead of copying grapheme for grapheme.

5.1 First of all, there are two pairs where it is only the spelling of the words which obscures the rhyme:

lines 24: *galdorwordum gol* *ahte ic ne ofoll*
 76: *ac him wenne gewigeð* *ond þa wist geþygeð*

where *oll* is the same Past Sg. form of *alan*, as in line 23, and the *geþygeð* is the Present Indicative 3Sg. form of a Strong Class 1 verb, with /i:/ in the stem.

5.2 In some instances the rhyme is tampered by a change of the suffix, the Present Indicative 3Sg. *-eð* has been replaced by the Pl. *-að*, probably because in the scribes language *a* was the usual vowel element in a verb suffix, that of the Sg3. was usually regularly syncopated (see **3.2** above), *e.g.*:

lines 64: *wræcfæð wriþað* *wraþ að smiteð*
 65: *syngryn sidað* *searofearo glideð*

where in both cases the Subject is evidently in the Singular.

5.3 There are different diphthongs in the following rhyme pairs:

lines 22: *staþolæhtum steald* *stepegongum weold*
 87: *soðne God geseon* *ond aa in sibbe gefean*

Both rhyme words of line 22 are verbs in Past 3Sg. *Weold* belongs to the Strong Class 7 and is an unproblematic form. Its partner, however,

represents more than one problem. In the form of the MS it seems to be the Past Tense form of the Weak Class 1 verb *steallan* ‘to place’ which in West Saxon regularly has the Past Sg. form *stealde*. If this verb had been meant, the *-e* personal marker is missing in the line. There are suggestions that it should be amended to *steold*, and in this case it would be the Past tense form of a Strong Class 7 (Reduplicating) verb ‘to possess’, the Infinitive of which incidentally has not been attested. Both the rhyme and the sense of the line makes the suggested amendment acceptable. The case of line 87 is just as interesting. *Gefea* is a noun, (Masculine *n*-stem) meaning ‘joy’, thus the meaning of the half line would be: ‘and forever in the joy of peace’. However, the finite verb of the sentence is *mot* which is the first rhyme word of line 86 and suggests a clause similar to the one in the first half of line 87, therefore the suggested amendment to *gefeon* is acceptable especially since its meaning is ‘to rejoice’.

5.4 The rest of the lines are so corrupt that there are no rhymes to speak of. The text of the MS will be juxtaposed with the suggested amendments (in brackets after the word they are supposed to amend). In this case it will be the meaning of the words which has to be discussed instead of the phonological problems.

5.4.1 Line 2: *ond þæt torhte geteoh [getah] tillice onwrah*

Both the actual MS form and the amendment causes semantic problems, because neither can be easily attested in Old English texts: *geteoh* is given as ‘creation(?)’ and *getah* as ‘teaching(?)’. It is true that *getah* at least provides a pure rhyme, one which is indicated without doubt by the rhyme pair in the previous line:

line 1: *Me lifes onlah se þis leoht onwrah*

(the rhymes of the first 24 four lines of the poem come with batches of four rhymes as indicated in **0.1** above).

5.4.2 Line 69: *eorðmægen ealdað ellen colað [cealdað]*

The meaning of *colan* is ‘to cool’, that of *cealdian* ‘to become cold’, *i.e.* the meaning of the two verbs is very close to one another, it easily could be a change of words due to similar meaning and similar sound pattern, and also that *colan* appears earlier in line 67.

5.4.3 There is a number of suggested amendments for some of the lines which have been discussed in **0.4.1** as possible instances for assonance.

Line 60: ond hetes henteð [hendeð] hæleþe scendeð

With *hentan* 'to pursue, follow after, seize': 'and pursues and causes to hurry the man of hate', while with the suggested *hendan* 'to hold' (but it is given only in its *ge-* prefixed form in Bosworth & Toller (1972)): 'and holds hate and causes the man to haste'.

5.4.4 Line 64: wræcfæc wriþað [writeð] wraþ að smiteð

Wriþan means 'to twist, turn, writhe, bind (up)', thus the translation of the line is: 'the time of misery writhes', while with *writan* 'to write': 'writes the time of misery'. It seems probable that the poet sometimes truly preferred assonance

5.4.5 The following line has two suggestions:

75: þonne lichoma ligeð lima wurm frigeð [frigeð]/[þigeð]

'When the body lies worm eats up the limbs'. With *frigeð*, the worm would 'free' the limbs, while *þigeð* means 'to prosper' but how can 'the worm prosper' with an Accusative, or should it be Pl. Gen.? Here again should we allow the possibility of assonance?

5.4.6 And also in the next line:

line 79: balawun her gehloten [gehroren]. Ne biþ se hlisa adroren

'for the wicked here appointed by lot'; with the amendment: 'here to the wicked failed'. We do not seem to gain much with the amendment.

5.4.7 Line 18 has a completely distorted rhyme:

line 18: þegnum geþhte þenden wæs ic mægen

6 Rhyme in Old English poetry

6.1 As to the origin of rhymes in the Old English period it is generally agreed that it must represent outside influence. One source could be the Latin hymns which usually had rhymes, and also Celtic practice is supposed to offer examples. The rhyming lines in the various poems and the *Rhyming Poem* in particular raise two important questions of Old English metre. One is: what should be considered to be the true unit of Old English alliterative poems. The consistent use of the internal rhymes point rather in the direction of the so called 'half line' than the traditional long line. Especially if we consider that many Old Icelandic poems are written in half

lines and in stanzas of eight lines. Again compared to Old Icelandic poetry, the rhyme pattern of the *Rhyming Poem* is nothing unique, there are numerous examples in OIc., moreover, there the rhyming groups are again arranged in stanzas, two batches of four rhymes per stanza. It seems that it is a great mistake to treat Old English metrics isolated from the other Germanic traditions, all these topics should be analysed in a wider context.

6.2 Though Krapp (1936) in his notes to the edition of the Exeter Book makes quite an extensive description about the possible relationship of the author of the *Rhyming Poem* and Egil, apparently no one took much notice of his ideas, let alone tried to follow up the lines Krapp has suggested *i.e.* about the time the *Rhyming Poem* was possibly construed and Egil's visit to Northumbria (in the 10th c., which Krapp decided was too late for the possible influence upon the *Rhyming* poet.) However, absolutely no one tried to find any parallels between the rhyming alliterative poems written in England, Norway/Iceland, Ireland and Continental Germanic languages, whereas where they exist, they appear as innovations, together with the stanzaic form. Though this latter cannot be stated about the *Rhyming Poem*, it is only the first third of the poem which shows the structure of quartet rhymes, quite regularly used in Egil's Saga and the Irish poems, but then either the original poet gave up this stanzaic character of the poem while construing his work, or the text of poem is more corrupt than we believe it to be.

6.3 Usually English traditions are treated as those of an island. It has not yet been pointed out that similar poetic means, *i.e.* alliteration coupled with internal rhymes and lines organized in short, usually four or eight line stanzas are also to be found in Early Irish poetry. It has been established, that this type of versification represents innovations in the Old Irish poetic tradition, but at the time the bulk of Irish poetic monuments had been written down, the form had already been well established and represented one of the possible poetic forms. The origins are not known, but it has been pointed out that there can be found important Scandinavian influence in Old Irish poetic dictum, thus there has been suggested connections between the stanzaic form with both alliteration and internal rhymes. On the other hand the influence of Medieval Latin rhyming poetry has also been contemplated, even if only in the form of a tentative suggestion.

7 Conclusions

7.1 The dialect of the poem

As we have the *Rhyming Poem* it clearly represents a late West Saxon text. The distorted rhymes discussed in Section 1, however, are clear indications that the present state of the poem is the result of dialect translation and the original had been written in an Anglian dialect. Some of the instances (Section 4) also point towards a very early date of the composition of the poem. This early date also seems to be supported by the difficulty of analysing the text, which lured scholars to great pains in trying to “reconstruct” the original, to give the poem a meaning acceptable for the modern reader.

7.2 This raises the question of the problem of amending the mishappen rhymes. Sometimes the editors admit that though the rhyme pattern would indicate how a pure rhyme could have been achieved, in some of the cases is rendered difficult by the meaning of the new suggestion, while the old word, *i.e.* the one in the MS makes the most sense. This also means that whatever the original word was in the poem, the distortion was made in order to give a clear sense to the line. There seems to be another misconception among the scholars, in that they wish to force a pattern of pure rhymes all through the poem, whereas assonances and slanting rhymes had also been acceptable.

7.3 In all three poetic traditions rhyme comes as an additional feature to alliteration, and represent an kind of metrical innovation. The origin of rhyme itself on the British Isles — and Iceland — means a major problem. It has been suggested that it was introduced on the influence of Medieval Latin hymns, at least in connection to their appearance in Irish and English poetry. No such influence could be ascribed to the introduction of rhymes in Iceland, unless it had been based on Irish-English examples. If we want to find satisfactory explanations concerning the poetic form of the *Rhyming Poem*, an extensive metrical analysis of Old Irish, Icelandic and Medieval Latin poetry (both on the British Isles and on the Continent) is necessary.

NOTE

- * For all linguistic references see the relevant sections of Campbell 1959.

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