

# The Elements of Old English Verse Form



P. S. Langeslag



## Do Not Come Looking for These!

- ▶ ~~End-rhyme~~ (But *The Riming Poem!*)
- ▶ ~~Stanzas~~ (But *Deor!*)
- ▶ ~~Refrains~~ (But *Deor!*)
- ▶ ~~Strict syllable counts~~
- ▶ ~~The same foot contour throughout a poem~~

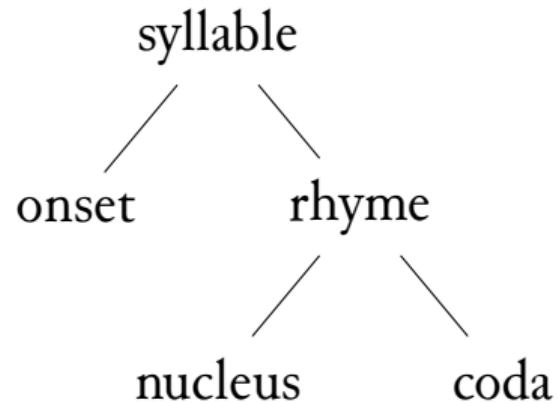
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Mē līfes onlāh se þis lēoht onwrāh,  
ond þæt torhte geteoh, tillīce onwrāh.  
Glæd wæs ic glīwum, glenged hīwum,  
blissa blēoum, blōstma hīwum.

*Rimming Poem 1–4*

# Syllable Structure



## What Is Rhyme?

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By this definition, all of the following count as rhyme:

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End-rhyme	The repetition at the end of two or more lines of the rhyme (i.e. nucleus and coda) of a stressed syllable along with any subsequent unstressed syllables
Internal rhyme	The repetition within a single line of the rhyme of a stressed syllable along with any subsequent unstressed syllables
Slant rhyme	Approximate repetition of the rhyme of a stressed syllable along with any subsequent unstressed syllables
Assonance	Repetition of the same vowel sound
<b>Paronomasia</b>	The use of similar-sounding words; includes slant rhyme and assonance
Alliteration	Repetition of the onset* of a stressed syllable

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\* See Russom.

## Verse Form

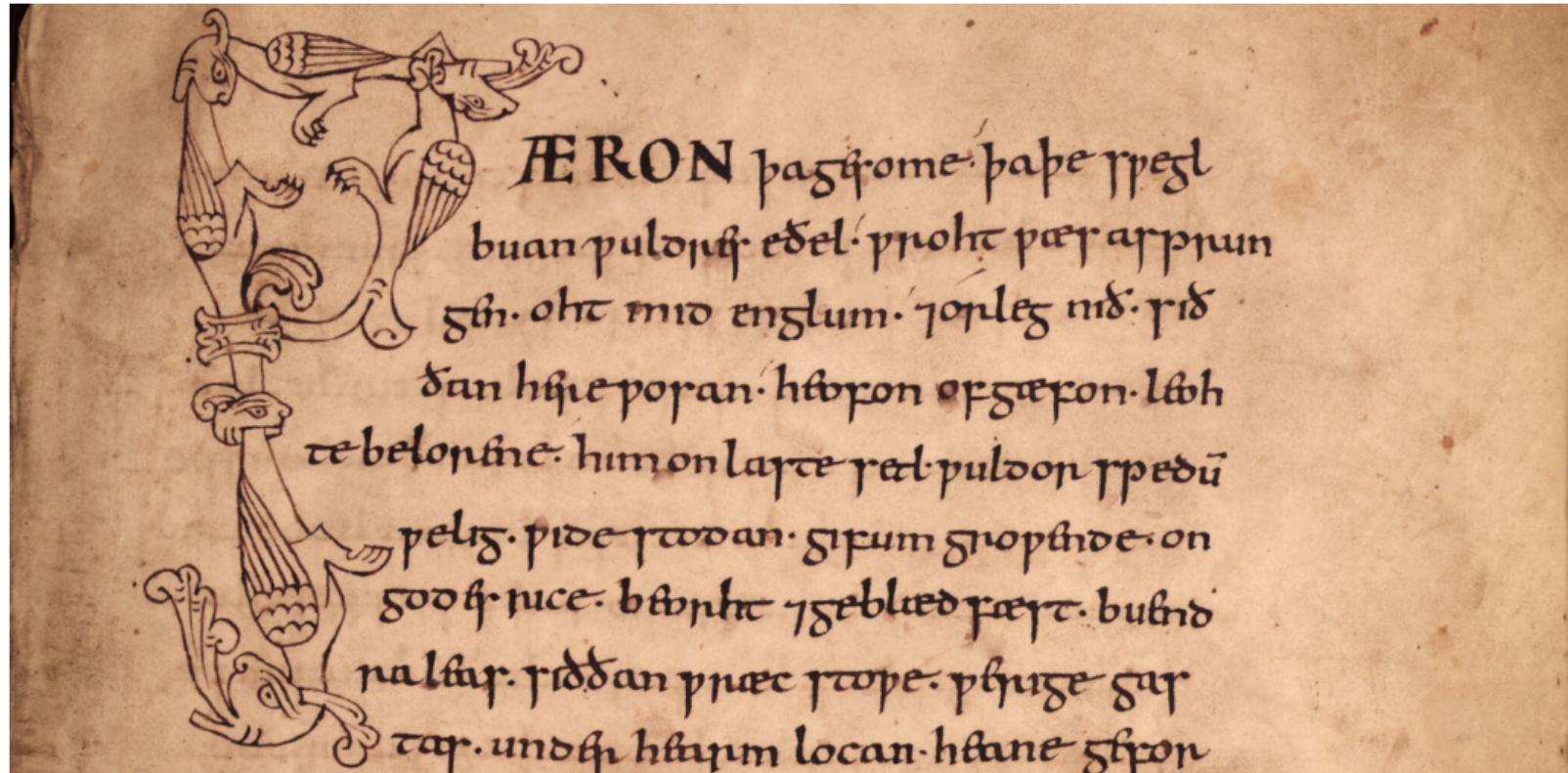


Figure 1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, p. 5 (detail); (c) Bodleian Library

## Rhythm

- ▶ Two verses per long line  
(separated by a caesura)
- ▶ Two feet per verse
- ▶ One full lift per foot
- ▶ Variable number of unstressed syllables per foot

Oft Scyld Scēfing | sceafena þrēatum,  
monegum māgþum | meodosetla oftēah,  
egsode eorlas, | syððan ārest wearð  
fēasceaft funden. | Hē þæs frōfre gebād:  
wēox under wolcnum, | weorðmyndum þāh,  
oðþæt him āghwylc | þāra ymbsittendra  
ofer hronrāde | hȳran scolde,  
gomban gyldan. | Þæt wæs gōd cyning.

## *Beowulf* 4-11

# Alliteration

- ▶ One (usually the first) or both lifts in the a-verse
- ▶ First lift in the b-verse
- ▶ Never the second lift in the b-verse
- ▶ Vowels alliterate among themselves
- ▶ *sc*, *sp*, *st* keep to themselves

× / × / × | / × / × / ×  
Oft **Scyld Scēfing** | **sceabena** þrēatum,  
/ × / × / × | / × / × / ×  
**monegum māgþum** | **meodosetla** oftēah,  
/ × × / × | × × / × /  
**egsode eorlas**, | **syððan** ārest wearð  
/ \ / × / × | × × / × × /  
**fēasceaft funden.** | **Hē þæs frōfre gebād:**  
/ × × / × | / × / × /  
**wēox under wolcnum**, | **weorðmyndum** þāh,  
× × / × / × | × × / / \ ×  
oðþæt him **āghwylc** | **þāra ymbsittendra**  
× × / / × | / × / ×  
ofer **hronrāde** | **hȳran** scolde,  
/ × / × | / × / ×  
**gomban gyldan.** | **þæt wæs gōd** cyning.

*sc-alliteration*

*vowel alliteration*

*vowel alliteration*

*Beowulf* 4–11

# Common Misconceptions About Alliteration in Old English Verse

1. ~~It concerns the first letter of a word.~~
2. ~~Any two words that begin with the same sound alliterate.~~
3. ~~It is normal and expected for it to extend over several lines.~~

# Special Kinds of Alliteration

## Crossed Alliteration

swā se **h**alga **w**er | **h**ergēnde **w**æs

*Azarias 49*

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Seasons for Fasting 100

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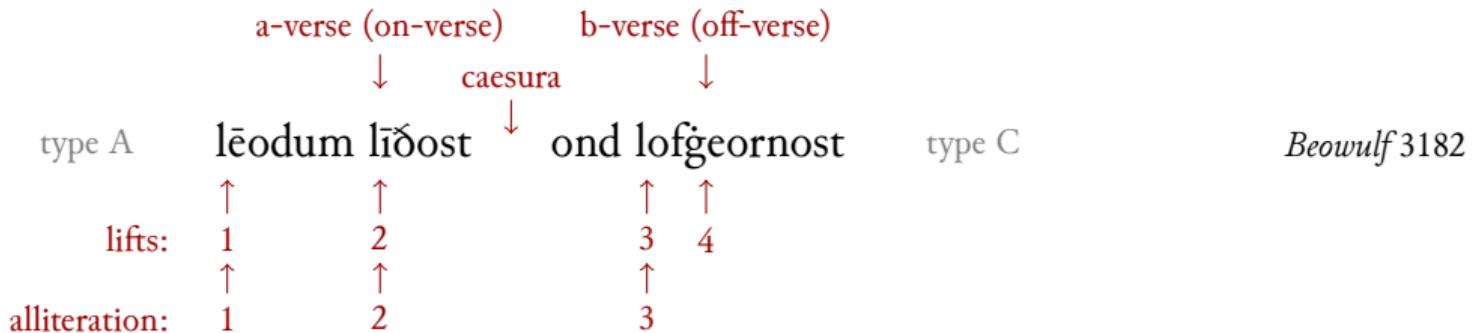
## Linked Alliteration

**s**inč **æ**t **s**ymle. | **S**ele **h**lifade

**h**ēah ond **h**orngēap; | **h**eaðowylma bād

*Beowulf* 81–82

# Schema of the Old English Verse Line



## Not in the Manuscripts

- ▶ ~~Verse layout~~
- ▶ ~~Modern punctuation~~
- ▶ ~~Modern capitalization~~
- ▶ ~~Line numbers~~
- ▶ ~~Modern emendations~~
- ▶ (Visible caesuras)

## Bibliography

Russom, Geoffrey. “General Principles of Poetic Form.” In *The Evolution of Verse Structure in Old and Middle English Poetry: From the Earliest Alliterative Poems to Iambic Pentameter*, by Geoffrey Russom, 1–34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

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