

# The Elements of Old English Verse Form



P. S. Langeslag

# Do Not Come Looking for These!

- ▶ ~~End-rhyme~~
- ▶ ~~Stanzas~~
- ▶ ~~Refrains~~
- ▶ ~~Strict syllable counts~~
- ▶ ~~The same foot contour throughout a poem~~

(But *The Riming Poem*!)

(But *Deor*!)

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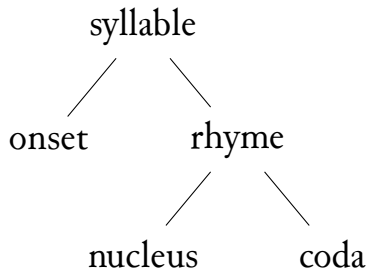
(But *Deor*!)

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

*Riming 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>Paranomasia</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

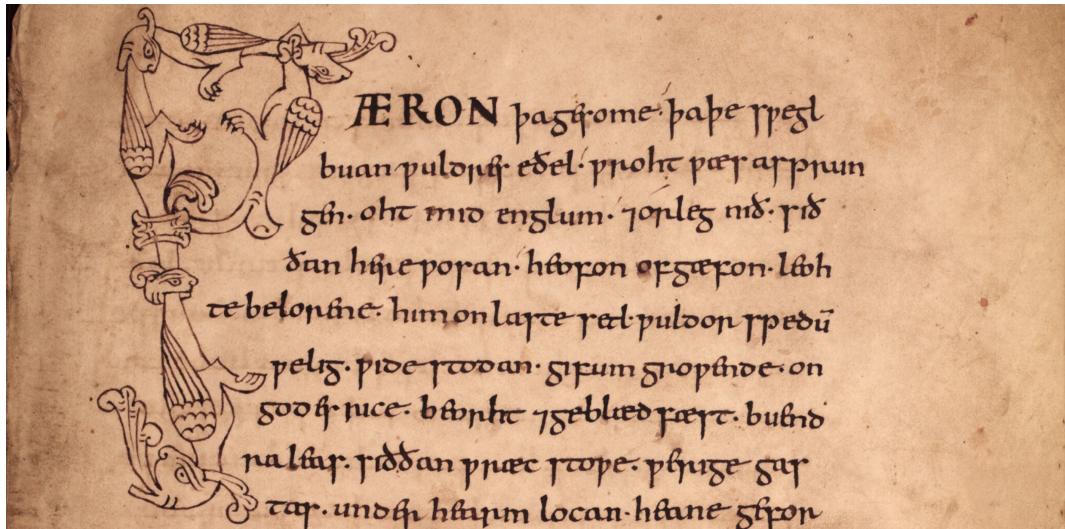


Figure 1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, p. 5 (detail); (c) Bodleian Library

# 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 | sceapena þrēatum,  
/   ×   /   ×   |   /   \   ×   ×   /  
monegum mægþum | meodosetla oftēah,  
/   ×   ×   /   ×   |   ×   ×   /   ×   /  
eġsode eorlas, | syððan ārest wearð  
/   \   /   ×   |   ×   ×   /   ×   ×   /  
fēasceaft funden. | Hē þæs frōfre ġebād:  
/   ×   ×   /   ×   |   /   \   \   ×   /  
wēox under wolcnum, | weorðmyndum þāh,  
×   ×   ×   /   ×   |   ×   ×   /   /   \   ×  
oðþæt him āġhwylc | þāra ymsittendra  
×   ×   /   /   ×   |   /   ×   /   ×  
ofer hronrāde | hýran scolde,  
/   ×   /   ×   |   ×   ×   /   /   ×  
gomban ġyldan. | 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

Öft **Sc**ylð **Sc**ēfing | **s**ceapena þrēatum,

*sc-alliteration*

**m**onegum **m**āgþum | **m**eodosetla oftēah,

**e**gsode **e**orlas, | syððan **ā**rest wearð

*vowel alliteration*

**f**ēasceaft **f**unden. | Hē þæs **f**rōfre gebād:

**w**ēox under **w**olcnum, | **w**eorðmyndum þāh,

oðþæt him **ā**ghwylc | þāra **y**mb sittendra

*vowel alliteration*

ofer **h**ronrāde | **h**ýran scolde,

**g**omban **g**ýldan. | þæt wæs **g**ōd cyning.

*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**ergende **w**æs

*Azarias 49*

# Special Kinds of Alliteration

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

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## Transverse Alliteration

**s**ancte **P**etres | **p**reostas **s**yþþan

*Seasons for Fasting 100*

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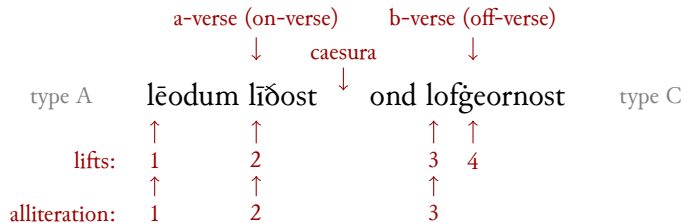
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## Linked Alliteration

**s**inc æt **s**ymle. | **S**ele **h**līfade  
**h**ēah ond **h**orngeap; | **h**eaðowylma bād

*Beowulf 81–82*

# Schema of the Old English Verse Line



*Beowulf* 3182

# 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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- Terasawa, Jun. *Old English Metre: An Introduction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.