

Anglo-Saxon Poetry: History and Composition

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1. About Anglo-Saxon Poetry
 - a. When was the earliest poetry?
 - i. No one really knows, Bede's mention of Caedmon is the first written evidence we have of Anglo Saxon poetry.
 - ii. Poetry definitely predates this, we just don't know by how much...
 - iii. Drat.
 - b. Who were the writers?
 - i. Usually poems were undated and written by anonymous poets
 1. This makes it difficult to place within a very specific context
 2. Usually people make guesses based on what was being experienced by the Anglo-Saxons
 3. Inferences can be made regarding the poem's providence
 - a. Beowulf – probably took place in the 6th Century, written down in the 11th Century
 - b. Maldon – took place in 991, only surviving copy exists from the 17th Century
 - ii. Caedmon
 1. From Bede
 2. Caedmon's Hymn, first English poem we know of
 - a. Christian poem about the Creation
 - iii. Cynewulf
 1. We know nothing about him!
 2. We have four poems
 - a. We know they're his because he's "signed" it with runes¹ that fit into the poem
 - c. Books of Poetry
 - i. Cotton Vitellius A.15, *Liber Monstrorum*
 1. The Beowulf Manuscript
 2. Has lots of monster stories
 3. Slightly cello-taped... sad...
 4. Sometimes called the Norwell Codex.
 - ii. The Junius Manuscript
 1. Caedmon Manuscript
 2. Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, Christ and Satan
 - iii. The Exeter Book
 1. Christ 1, 2, 3
 2. The Riddles
 3. Wulf and Edwacer, the Wife's Lament, and the Husband's Message
 - iv. Vercelli
 1. Dream of the Rood and other Christian poems
 - d. Types of Poetry
 - i. Allegorical/Religious
 1. Exodus
 - ii. Heroic
 1. Beowulf
 - e. Performance of Poetry
 - i. Possibly sung and accompanied by a lyre
 - ii. Stress and alliteration are keys to the musical sound
 - iii. Performed from memory
2. Writing Anglo Saxon Poetry
 - a. Metrics

¹ Runes can be logographic

- i. Half lines
 1. The caesura is very important, it should be a natural break for breath
 2. Each half line should be around four syllables

- ii. Stress patterns

1. The five (plus) Siever forms

Type	Stresses	Example (Major stress in bold, minor in italics)
A.	SwSw	Hostig H ardrad
B.	wSwS	On high hills or low (<i>wSwwS</i>)
C.	wSSw	The white snow fell
D.a.	SSsw	Bright <i>archangels</i>
D.b.	SSws	Bold brazen <i>faced</i> (<i>SSwsS</i>)
E.	SwwS	High -seated king

2. S – stressed, s – secondary stressed, w – unstressed
3. Each half line may have only two stressed syllables
 - a. Usually
 - b. Some verses are hypermetric², and what a pain they are...
4. The two half lines that make up a line do not have to have the same Stress Type³

- b. Alliteration and Rhyme

- i. Rhyme existed, deal with it.
- ii. Alliteration is complicated
- iii. The stressed syllables should alliterate
- iv. What is alliteration?
 1. Vowels alliterate with any other vowel, though staying close in sound is good.
 2. Some consonant clusters can only alliterate with themselves, ‘st’ alliterates with ‘st’ but never with ‘sn’
 - a. In Anglo-Saxon these clusters are ‘sc’, ‘sp’, and ‘st’
 - b. Modern English should also include ‘sh’, the modern version of ‘sc’, ‘th’ which was represented in a single letter in Anglo-Saxon, ‘kn’, and ‘ch’ which was represented by ‘c’⁴

- v. Patterns of alliteration

1. xa|ay – I run all day / down darkened paths – usually appears when the initial stressed syllable is weak, such as a finite verb or weak noun/adjective
2. ax|ay and aa|ax – the red gold shirt / wrought for the lord – usually appears when the initial stressed syllable is strong, such as a strong verb, noun, or adjective⁵
3. ab|ab (transverse alliteration) and ab|ba (crossed alliteration) were considered very hoity-toity.
4. The best way to understand alliteration is to practice it, learn what sounds right and what doesn’t.

- c. Formulas

- i. There were some basic formulas
 1. In phrases
 - a. Hrothgar, helmet of the Scyldings, spoke...
 - i. Name, qualifier in an extended possessive, verb...
 - b. The guard spoke where he sat on his horse, a fearless leader
 - i. Name verb description, parenthetical that refers back to the name
 - c. Look to the poetry for more

² Have more than their allotted number of syllables

³ One can be mildly neurotic while the other is OCD

⁴ There may be more, I just couldn’t think of them

⁵ This is a tricky concept, we don’t really have them in Modern English. Basically if the initial syllable is a finite verb use the first form, if not use the second. Or, if you’d rather, go crazy and use whatever you want!

- d. It may have been a way for the poet or performer to whip out a line when he forgot the one that was supposed to be there, the “la, la, la” verse
 - 2. In themes
 - a. With battles, it is customary for the scavengers to be mentioned, just in case anyone forgets what happens to the losers
 - b. In elegies, weather is used to indicate the speaker’s emotional state
 - c. Flytings are used as a prelude to actual combat, basically an Anglo-Saxon slam poetry session
 - d. Again, look to the poetry for more examples
 - 3. Playing with the formulas was what kept listeners interested in what was going on.
- d. Vocabulary
 - i. Kennings
 - 1. Kennings are great
 - a. Whale-road
 - b. First-spear
 - c. Sea-wood
 - d. Bone-house
 - 2. A kenning is basically a two word combination that alludes to a third word not mentioned
 - a. The kennings above refer to
 - i. The sea
 - ii. The war-leader
 - iii. A ship
 - iv. A body
 - 3. A great way to have fun with words
 - ii. Repetition
 - 1. Referring back to a person using a different word
 - 2. Man becomes warrior which becomes dancer and so forth, let your vocabulary stretch!
 - 3. Helpful with difficult alliterations
 - iii. Archaic or poetic vocabulary
 - 1. Some words appear only in poetry, they may be archaic or they may have been used only in poetry. Consider using obscure words when composing your own verses.
- e. Word games
 - i. The use of hidden words or logographic runes, especially in the riddles
- f. Syntax
 - i. Omission of subjects or objects was frequent
 - ii. Omission of prepositions (more difficult in English, we don’t have a dative case)
 - 1. Basically the omission of all the “small” words
 - iii. Use of adjectives as nouns, ‘the strong’ instead of ‘the strong man’
 - iv. Messing with word order!
 - 1. Verb-subject
 - 2. Object-subject

Useful Books and Web Sites

Introduction to Old English by Peter S. Baker

Anglo-Saxon Riddles edited by John Porter

Old and Middle English c. 890 – c. 1400 edited by Elaine Treharne

<http://www.engl.virginia.edu/OE/> Peter S. Baker’s “Old English Aerobics”

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ascp/> The Complete Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Poetry

<http://fred.wheatonma.edu/wordpressmu/mdrout> Anglo Saxon Aloud

<http://www.tha-engliscan-gesithas.org.uk/readings/readings.html> Readings from Anglo-Saxon Poetry

Practice!

I. Mark for stress and alliteration, the first line has been done for you

^a ^x ^a ^x
(w)w S w S S w S w
Ic þa with geseah wæpnedcynnes,

I saw a beast bristling with weapons

Geogupmyrþe grædig; him on gafol forlet

greedy with the glee of youth; he tugged tribute

Ferþfripende feower wellan

from four life-giving fountains

Scire sceotan on gesceap þeotan.

Brightly jetting, drizzling delight.

Mon maþelade, se þe me gesægde:

A man spoke and said to me:

“Seo with, giho gedyegeþ, duna briceþ

“If he lives this beast will break fields,

Gif he tobirsteþ, bindeþ cwice.

If he dies, he will bind the living.”

Try writing your own poem, keeping in mind what we've talked about regarding stress and alliteration

_____	/	_____
_____	/	_____
_____	/	_____
_____	/	_____
_____	/	_____
_____	/	_____
_____	/	_____