The Basics of Old English Verse

*Unless otherwise noted, lines cited here are taken from the excerpt from the Metres of Boethius on pp. 240-2 of Mitchell & Robinson.

1.) The Typical Old English Poetic Line

– A line of Old English verse is composed of two half-lines or verses. The first of these is called the 'on-verse' or the 'a-verse', the second the 'off-verse' or 'b-verse'. These are separated by a pause, known as a caesura, which is usually indicated in modern editions by a space:

\[ \text{Gotena rīce gēarmǣlum wēox.} \]
\[ (on-verse) \quad (caesura) \quad (off-verse) \]

– Each half-line has two syllables that bear accent (a term often used interchangeably with stress). In the above line, the four syllables whose first letters are in boldface are accented or stressed. The accents in an Old English poetic line are those of normal Old English speech.

2.) Alliteration

– In Old English poetry, verses are linked not by end-rhyme (as in most modern English verse), but by alliteration—the shared repetition of an initial sound. In the example above, the on-verse and off-verse are linked by alliteration on the letter 'g' (Gotena ... gēarmǣlum). *

– In a normal Old English poetic line, either one or both accented syllables in the on-verse must alliterate with the first (and only the first) accented syllable in the off-verse. The second accented syllable in the off-verse does not alliterate.

\[ \text{Rēdgōd and Alerīc; rīce gehūngon.} \]
\[ \text{or} \]
\[ \text{Rōm gerūmed; Rēdgōt and Alerīc} \]

– **Two technicalities of OE alliteration:** 1) A vowel at the beginning of an accented syllable alliterates with any other syllable beginning with a vowel (e.g., 'āgan' alliterates with 'eall'), and 2) the initial consonant clusters sc-, sp-, and st- may only alliterate with themselves, not with any accented syllable starting with 's' (e.g., 'scīr' alliterates with 'sceafte', but not with 'sōþ').

3.) Syllable Length

– Most accented syllables are long. A syllable is long if it fulfills one of two criteria:

*Note: The hard 'g' (in 'Gotena') and soft or palatal 'g' (in 'gēarmǣlum') are distinct sounds. However, because they both derive from the same West Germanic sound, they are considered to alliterate by poetic convention. The same is true of hard and soft 'c'.*
1.) The syllable contains a long vowel (thus, the first syllable in 'rīce' is long). The vowels in such syllables are said to be **long by nature**.

2.) it contains a short vowel followed by two consonants (thus, the second syllable in 'geþungon' is long). The vowels in such syllables are said to be **long by position**.

Sometimes, a word composed of two short syllables may bear accent in place of a single long syllable. Such words are said to have **resolved stress**.

### 4.) A Closer Look at Accent

The strong accent borne by the main accented syllables in a line is called **primary accent**. In the analysis (or *scansion*) of OE poetry, this is traditionally marked with `/ ` or `´` (I will use `/`). Syllables bearing primary accent are often called **lifts**.

Some syllables, especially the second elements of compounds, bear less stress but are not entirely unaccented. These bear **secondary accent**. These are marked with `\` or `´` (I will use `\`). Syllables bearing secondary accent are often called **half-lifts**.

Syllables which bear no accent at all are (sensibly enough) said to be **unaccented** and are marked with an `x`. An unaccented syllable is often called a **drop**.

Mitchell and Robinson give the following modern English sentence that contains all three levels of accent:

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/ \ / x x /
blindman's buff is a game.
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Primary accent in a word with resolved stress can be represented by `´x` or `/x`.

### 5.) The Five Types

German philologist Eduard Sievers (1850-1932) demonstrated that any traditional West Germanic half-line (including an OE verse) will follow one of five accent patterns, designated **A**, **B**, **C**, **D**, or **E**. Of these, the most common is **A**. Remember that these patterns operate at the level of the half-line; consequently, a line of OE poetry may consist of any combination of two of these five types.

The list on the following page gives the accent pattern of each Sievers type, along with a traditional modern English mnemonic and a scanned Old English example of a verse of that type. In many lines, a number of unaccented syllables are allowed to come after or before the first lift. These are given in parentheses. For a more detailed account, see Mitchell and Robinson, pp. 164-5.
The Five Old English Verse Types: A Summary Sheet

**Type A**: / x (x x x x) / x (lift, drop[s], lift, drop)’

/ x / x

*Modern English approximation*: 'Anna angry'

/ x / x

*Old English example (10[b], 16b)*: ēðel mārsað

**Type B**: (x x x x) x / x (x) / (drop[s], lift, drop[s], lift)

x / x / x

*Modern English approximation*: 'And Byrhtnoth bold'

x x / x / x

*Old English example (10[b], 1a)*: hit wæs gēara iū

**Type C**: (x x x x x) x / / x (drop[s], lift, lift, drop)

x / / x

*Modern English approximation*: 'In keen conflict'

x / / x

*Old English example (Beowulf 4a)*: oft Scyld Scēfing

**Type D, variant 1**: / (x x) / \ x (lift, [optional drop[s],] lift, half-lift, drop)

/ / \ x

*Modern English approximation*: 'Ding down strongly'

/ / \ \ x

*Old English example (10[b], 20b)*: flēah cāsere

**Type D, variant 2**: / (x x x) / x \ (lift, [optional drop[s],] lift, drop, half-lift)

/ / x / \ x

*Modern English approximation*: 'Deal death to all'

/ / x / \ x

*Old English example (Beowulf 18b)*: blād wīde sprang

**Type E**: / (x) / (lift, half-lift, drop[s], lift)

/ / \ x / x

*Modern English approximation*: 'Each one with edge'

/ / \ x / x

*Old English example (10[b], 5b)*: gēarmǣlum wēox.

**Note**: Certain types of words are more likely to bear primary stress than others. The first syllables of nouns, adjectives, and infinitives are most likely to be accented. Other words, such as finite verb forms and prepositions, are less likely to bear primary accent, but may do so in certain circumstances (see, for instance, the OE example under Type E, above). Articles, prefixes, suffixes, conjunctions, and pronouns are almost never accented.

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* Sometimes one or two unaccented syllables precede the first lift in a type-A or type-D verse. This phenomenon is called anacrusis. For more details, see Mitchell and Robinson, pp. 165-6.
6.) Medieval Germanic Poetic Vocabulary: The Kenning

- As is the case in many cultures, Old English (and Old Saxon, Old Norse, etc.) poetry was characterised by a more archaic and figurative vocabulary than appears in most prose works.

- The best-known element of medieval Germanic poetic vocabulary was the kenning—a roundabout, often metaphorical expression used to describe a thing rather than a simple noun. Kennings could be compounds or multi-word phrases.

- Kennings used in Beowulf include hronrād ('whale-road' → ocean); bānhūs ('bone-house' → body); heofena helm ('the helmet/protection of the heavens' → God).

- In general, Old English kennings are fairly transparent; this is not always the case in the related poetic tradition of Scandinavia and Iceland. Try to figure out these Old Norse kennings:
  - svanbekkr (literally 'swan-bench')
  - sólbryggja (literally 'sun-pier' or 'sun-bridge')
  - armbrandr (literally 'arm-fire')

7.) Variation

- Another stylistic element characteristic of Old English poetry is variation, the use of multiple synonyms filling the same syntactic role (subject, object, etc.) in a sentence. You have already seen a noteworthy example in Caedmon's Hymn (Mitchell and Robinson, p. 234):

\[
\text{Þā middangeard } \text{moncynnnes Weard,} \\
\text{ēce Drihten, } \text{æfter tēode} \\
\text{firum foldan, } \text{Frēa ælmihtig.}
\]

The three noun phrases in boldface fulfill the same grammatical role in the sentence; they are all the subject of the verb 'tēode'. At the same time, the underlined words 'middangeard' and 'foldan' provide another example of variation; both are accusative objects of 'tēode', and are synonyms for the same thing (the world).