On *Ælfric* and Old English Metrical Theory

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In 2016, Thomas A. Bredehoft wrote a reply to my criticism of his theory of Old English metre, according to which Ælfric's rhythmical compositions ought to be considered verse rather than prose. Here, I provide an answer to some of the points and some of the objections raised in his 2016 essay. I conclude that Bredehoft's criticism of traditional Old English metrical theory is unwarranted, and that Ælfric appears to have regarded his rhythmical style as a special manner of prose composition. The piece ends in a positive note, commending Bredehoft for his work on Laȝamon's Brut and Chronicle verse.

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J. R. R. Tolkien, in his lecture on "Old English Prosody" (published posthumously for the first time in 2023), pointedly observed that quarrels of metrists are more notorious than those of theologians (129). In 2016, Thomas A. Bredehoft wrote a critical response to my essay "Ælfric's Rhythmical Prose and the Study of Old English Metre." In that article, I had taken issue with some crucial aspects of Bredehoft's proposed new theory of Old English metrics (2005), according to which Ælfrician texts composed in the rhythmical-alliterative style ought to be regarded as verse rather than as a special form of prose (as have traditionally been considered). The aim of this piece is to address some of the points and some of the objections raised by Bredehoft in his response to my article. The purpose to do this now, eight years after the publication of Bredehoft's response, is not of course to rekindle the quarrel for its own sake by poking the bear (pace Tolkien), but to put forward a few ideas that, given the renewed interest among medievalists in poetic metre and in prose, might be profitable to readers of this journal.

In his book on *Early English Metre* (2005), Bredehoft introduced several modifications to traditional Sieversian metrics in order to make it more flexible (and thus capable of accounting for a greater number of texts as metrical or poetic). He then applied his new set of rules to Ælfric's rhythmical-alliterative compositions, and since these could be seen to be compatible with the newly proposed metrical rules, Bredehoft concluded that Ælfric ought to be regarded as

a poet or at least a versifier—a conclusion that the unwarranted rigidity of Sieversian metrics had prevented us from reaching. In my critique of his book, I argued that Bredehoft's new rules were empirically unjustified, in the sense that, if they were correct, one should expect to find in the poetic texts verses that were studiously avoided by the poets despite being linguistically possible. For example, there is in Bredehoft's theory no stipulation against four-syllable verses like *wiga mǣre*, with a resolvable sequence in first position, and yet they are virtually never found in the corpus.[1] More significantly, perhaps, I showed that Bredehoft's rules for late Old English verse were so lax that they could be successfully applied to texts universally regarded as composed in ordinary, non-rhythmical prose (such as Ælfric's introduction to his *Life of St Edmund*). I therefore concluded that his argument that the rhythmical-alliterative style was verse rather than prose was mistaken, since it was predicated on the empirical validity of a set of rules that could be shown to be erroneous.

In his response to my critique, Bredehoft (2005) conceded that some of the principles of his metrical theory (such as his account of the workings of resolution) were wrong. But he also said the following:

> What I tried that was impossible, I now understand, was to have attempted to make a metrical argument for whether or not Ælfric's rhythmical compositions are properly labelled as prose or verse. In structuring our arguments this way, I will point out, Pascual and I have both erred similarly. I was wrong to use metrical analysis to try to convince anyone that Ælfric was a poet; he is, I believe, wrong to suggest that if my formalism fails for Ælfric, Ælfric must have been writing prose. Of course that conclusion does not and cannot follow: even if my account of late Old English verse is utterly wrong, that does not prove that it is not verse: it can only prove that my analysis was incorrect. (Bredehoft 2005, 111)

And he also said that "we must find some basis for deciding if Ælfric was writing prose or verse before we even begin to contemplate a metrical analysis" (112). Later in the piece, he cites Gerard Manly Hopkins's definition of verse as "speech wholly or partially repeating the same figure of sound," and concludes that since Ælfric's rhythmical compositions have a sufficiently repeating "figure of sound" (as suggested by the fact that W. W. Skeat lineated them in his edition of the *Lives of Saints*), they ought to be considered verse. I also believe that the basis to decide whether Ælfric wrote verse or prose must be ultimately non-metrical, and that the question that we need to ask ourselves is if Ælfric saw his rhythmical style as one or the other. This is a point that I already made in my critique of his piece

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[1] The reason is that resolution of *wiga*, being under primary stress, is compulsory, and so the verse would consist of only three positions (one below the required minimum of four). On the implausibility of three-position verses, see Pascual (2013, 2014, and 2017a).

(2014, 820), and I was there repeating a point previously made by R. D. Fulk (2004, 309), and so I must here confess my disappointment that there is no reference to this in his response to my article. Therein I referred to a few comments by Ælfric that suggest that he regarded his rhythmical-alliterative style as prose, and for greater clarity I will quote extracts from them here. This is how Ælfric referred to a now lost life of St Thomas in a note to his Second Series of Catholic Homilies (Wilcox 1994, 113): *Thomes ðrowunge we forlætað unawritene, for ðan ðe heo wæs gefyrn awend of Ledene on Englisc on leoðwison* "We leave the passion of Thomas unwritten because it was translated from Latin into English verse long ago."[2] And here is how he referred to his rhythmical-alliterative renderings of the Books of Esther and Judith in his letter to Sigeweard (Crawford 1922, 48):

> Hester seo cwen, þe hire kynn ahredde, hæfð eac ane boc on þisum getele, for ðan þe Godes lof ys gelogod þæron; ða ic awende on Englisc on ure wisan sceortlice. Iudith seo wuduwe, þe oferwann Holofernem þone Siriscan ealdormann, hæfð hire agene boc betwux þisum bocum be hire agenum sige; seo ys eac on Englisc on ure wisan gesett eow mannum to bysne, þæt ge eowerne eard mid wæmnum bewerian wið onwinnendne here.

> Queen Esther, who saved her people, also has a book in this series, because the praise of God is contained therein; that I briefly translated into English after our manner. The widow Judith, who subdued the Syrian general Holofernes, has her own book among these books about her own victory; that has also been translated into English after our manner as an example to you men, so that you may defend your country with weapons against an invading army.

These extracts show that Ælfric did not equate his rhythmical-alliterative style (*on ure wisan*) with verse (*on leoðwison*). What they seem to suggest instead is that he saw his style as a special manner of prose composition. Bredehoft is of course free to ignore what Ælfric might have thought about his style and still regard it as verse, but this should not be taken to imply that compositions in the rhythmical-alliterative mode constitute the intermediate link between classical Old English metre and Late Middle English alliterative versification. Alliterative, prosodic, and lexical considerations indicate that Ælfric's style (regardless of whether it is considered verse or prose) lies outside the direct line of metrical evolution from Old to Middle English.[3]

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[2] Translations from Old English are mine.
[3] On this see for example Fulk (2004), Pascual (2017b), and Neidorf and Pascual (2020).

A line of reasoning that underlies both Bredehoft's monograph and his response to my critique is that one should be sceptical about contemporary Sieversian metrical scholarship because it is so technical and complicated that Anglo-Saxon poets would not have been able to understand it. Thus, in the discussion of resolution in *Beowulf* contained in his 2016 response to my article, he says:

> But I am equally sure that when the *Beowulf* poet spoke to his or her friends and acquaintances, she or he did not discuss verses like *Beowulf* 2357a, *freawine folca* (friend and lord of the people) in terms of the "etymological length of the desinences involved." [note] Something about such verses sounded acceptable to the *Beowulf* poet, while verses with different etymological endings must have sounded unacceptable to his or her ear. (113)

I of course agree with Bredehoft that the *Beowulf* poet would not have discussed verses like *frēawine folca* using modern linguistic terminology,[4] but I also believe that that is no good reason to have doubts about the validity of the analysis. In my 2014 article, I drew an analogy with modern grammars of Old English. An Anglo-Saxon today would find it very hard to understand Campbell's *Old English Grammar* or Mitchell's *Old English Syntax*, but surely that does not mean that those books fail to describe the language that he or she spoke. The point was eloquently expressed by Tolkien in his lecture on "Old English Prosody":

> The proof of the pudding is not only in the eating but in the making or at any rate reproduction. Only a *correct recipe* – though it may be expressed in words and in manner quite different from those of the original cook, and even perhaps unintelligible to him – will produce the same pudding. Only using a recipe founded on Sievers' analysis – with modifications perhaps, but not fundamental alteration – can Old English verse be *written*: by which I mean can anyone who knows the OE verse language write new matter in it, which is not only a string of half-lines actually found in our records (this can be done without any metrical knowledge or theory at all!), and which does not only contain *some* lines of a pattern actually found, but also contains *no lines* which are *not* found. (2023, 130)

If one introduces fundamental changes to Sieversian metrics on the grounds that a metrical theory must be expressed in simple terms in order to be reliable, then one is bound to come up with a system that is at odds with the evidence furnished by the poetic manuscripts. The example of verses like the hypothetical *wiga mǣre was mentioned above. According to Bredehoft's simplified rule of resolution they ought to occur, and yet they are virtually never found. In his piece

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4 *Beowulf* is cited from the fourth edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* (Fulk et al. 2008).

(2016), he raised a similar objection against the traditional notion of the metrical position (or *Glied* in German), which is essential to Sieversian theory:

> If one can bear with my engaging in speculation, I suspect that the notion of the position comes from thinking about Old English metre by gazing upon a chart filled with slash marks and xs: it is a result of abstracting the data down to a system. I hope it is acceptable to note that it is very unlikely that Old English poets thought about their verses in such terms. But to suspect that they could count (to two, in counting feet, and up to four, in counting the syllables of feet) seems at least plausible. In that sense, the notion of "positions" may be a convenience for analysts, but it may not be a feature of the poetry, and it seems especially unlikely to be a fundamental principle of the metre. (114, n. 12)

Bredehoft might find the notion of the foot superior to that of the position, but a foot-based system encounters obstacles which do not exist for a system based on positions. For example, a verse like *Beowulf* 1230a, *þeġnas syndon ġeþwǣre*, is analysed as Sx/(xxx)Sx according to Bredehoft, that is, two Sx feet patterned on trochaic words and a series of three extrametrical unstressed syllables. The problem with this analysis is that in such verses double alliteration is virtually compulsory, while in verses like 146a, *hūsa sēlest*, double alliteration is not required. The metre was thus clearly sensitive to the larger number of unstressed syllables in verses like 1230a, and so their classification as extrametrical (which Bredehoft's foot-based theory demands) is unwarranted. In traditional Sieversian metrics, on the other hand, all the unstressed syllables between the two stresses (*-nas syndon ġe-*) are analysed as a single unit or position that is fully integrated within the metrical scheme of the verse. Thus, the positional analysis (unlike the word-foot interpretation) is of a piece with the evidence furnished by the alliteration.

Bredehoft also doubts the validity of Sievers's positional interpretation on the grounds that the notion of the position has no linguistic existence, but the reality of metrical positions can be shown to receive corroboration from the grammar of the language. In Old English morphology, short-stemmed *wine* (from earlier **winiz*) is grammatically equivalent to long-stemmed *wyrm* (from earlier **wurmiz*), just as in poetry disyllabic *wine* and monosyllabic *wyrm* are often metrically interchangeable (cf. 30b, *wine Scyldinga*, with 2827a, *wyrm wōhbogen*, both of which are four-position Type D verses even though the former consists of five syllables and the latter consists of four). That an uninterrupted series of unstressed syllables constitutes a single unit, or drop, is suggested by the requirement for most such verses to evince double alliteration. Bredehoft also sees the existence of expanded Type D* half-lines as a reason to question the reliability of the four-position rule. To put it in his own words:

> But the existence of metrical Old English verses with five "positions" has never been in doubt: see, for instance, *Wanderer* 7a: *wraþra wælsleahta* (of fierce slaughters), to be scanned as Sx/ Ssx. [note] The existence of such verses is usually finessed by claiming that unexpanded Type D [S/Ssx] fits the four-position rule perfectly, and that expanded Type D* is a rarer alternative that is some kind of exception to the four-position rule. [note] But of course there are two problems here. First, if there are exceptions to the four-position rule, just how reliable is it as an explanatory or even descriptive rule, much less a fundamental principle? [note] Second, why is it that in most Old English poems (*Beowulf* is a notable exception to the general trend), expanded Type D* verses actually outnumber unexpanded Type D? [note] (115)

In response to Bredehoft's first question: scholars regard the four-position rule as a fundamental principle of poetic composition in Old English because, even though there are exceptional five-position verses like *wraþra wælsleahta*, that principle remains a useful way to account for most half-lines in Old English poetry. Similarly, that modern English nouns become plural by adding -(*e*)*s* to the end remains a useful generalization, even though plural forms like *feet*, *mice*, and *fish* constitute well-known exceptions to it. And in response to his second question: the reason to consider expanded Type D* a special variety of Type D, even if instances of the former often outnumber those of the latter, is that expanded Type D* half-lines received a special treatment from Old English poets while Type D verses did not. Thus, expanded Type D* half-lines are systematically found in the on-verse and evince double alliteration, while normal Type D verses can freely appear either in the first or in the second half of the line, and when they are in the first half they can have either single or double alliteration (cf. *The Wanderer* 7a with *Beowulf* 30b, for example, and *Beowulf* 31a with 268a).

I hope to have shown that the criticisms raised by Bredehoft against traditional Old English metrical theory are unjustified, and that in a number of key issues the traditional interpretation can be demonstrated to account for the textual evidence considerably better than Bredehoft's proposed metrical system; and also that, even though the question of whether Ælfric's rhythmical-alliterative style is verse or prose is ultimately subjective, Ælfric himself appears to have regarded it as a special mode of prose composition. To end in a positive note (and thus to show that quarrels of metrists are not necessarily always too notorious), I should like to stress that Bredehoft's (2005) monograph, even though problematic in several ways, also made a number of valuable contributions to the study of medieval English alliterative verse. I would like to single out his chapter on "Layamon's Old English Poetics." It has traditionally been thought that the style of Laȝamon's work is more closely related to that of *Chronicle* verse than to Old English poetry of the classical type (see, for example, Everett 1955). In that

chapter, Bredehoft compellingly shows on the strength of numerous remarkable parallels that the traditional association of the *Brut* with *Chronicle* poetry is real and justified. It is to be hoped that other scholars will follow in Bredehoft's footsteps and will produce new work on the connection between those two fascinating bodies of verse.

Funding

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