

An Overlooked Old English Verse Composition by Edward Thwaites (1671–1711) in Cædmonian Style

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Edward Thwaites, who published an edition of the Old English *Heptateuch* in 1698 and was an important contributor/editor behind the scenes to George Hickes's *Antiquæ Literaturæ Septentrionalis [Thesaurus] Libri Duo* (1703–5), is well known as one of the Oxford Saxonists, some of whom contributed their own attempts at Old English verse composition to commemorative exercises published by the University in support of the monarchy. Such collections of poetry, produced in considerable numbers by both Oxford and Cambridge universities from the middle of the sixteenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries, comprised contributions mainly in Latin, but also in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and Old English. One such neo-Old English contribution by Edward Thwaites has been overlooked, and the present essay reproduces it, with a translation, and considers its faults and merits as an attempt at Old English verse. In style it accords with the usage of the later poems in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* rather than that of the so-called Cædmonian poems.

Keywords: Thwaites; seventeenth-century OE verse composition; universities and the monarchy; poems of the Junius Manuscript; *Judith*; OE verse analysis

Introduction

Edward Thwaites's contribution to early Anglo-Saxon studies is well known (Ross and Collins 2004). One of the Oxford Saxonists, he published an edition of the Old English *Heptateuch* in 1698 (Lucas 2024a, 549–50; entry for “1698.1”),¹ and he produced an unpublished printed specimen of the Alfredian *Pastoral Care* c. 1700 (Lucas 2024a, 557–668; entry for “1700?.1”). He later published two further books in the Old English field, *Notæ in Anglo-Saxonum Nummos* (Thwaites 1708; Carter 1975, 454, no. 14), a commentary on Anglo-Saxon coins, and *Grammatica Anglo-Saxonica ex Hickesiano Linguarum Septentrionalium Thesauro excerpta* (Thwaites 1711; Carter 1975, 461, no. 12), an Old English grammar abridged for students from the earlier one by Hickes (1689). This was Thwaites's last work, as he was ill, and died after an amputation that same year, 1711 (Prewer 1993). In the meantime, Thwaites was ex-

¹ In Lucas (2024a) entry headings are in bold type, but in deference to *SELIM* editorial style they are here given in roman type enclosed in inverted commas.

tremely active behind the scenes. He assisted the young Thomas Benson with his *Vocabularium Anglo-Saxonicum Lexicon Gul. Somneri magna parte auctius* (Lucas 2024a, 558–59; entry for “1701.1”), an abridged version of Somner (1659). And, most importantly, he effectively coordinated the work of getting the *Thesaurus* by Hickes et al. (1703–5) through the press while Hickes had to stay in hiding away from Oxford because of being a non-juror (Lucas 2024a, 565; and references).

University Commemorative Verse Compositions

Before all of this, Thwaites contributed an Anglo-Saxon verse composition to one of Oxford University’s corporate exercises in veneration of the monarchy and higher nobility. Such collections of poetry in commemoration of major public events were produced in considerable numbers by both Oxford and Cambridge universities from the middle of the sixteenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries (Money 1998, 229–49). The majority of contributions were in Latin, as well as Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and Old English. They were a useful exercise in showcasing the writer’s skills and mastery of the language in its verse forms, a factor that has been recognized in recent scholarly teaching practice for Old English (Pascual 2022). The contribution of verse compositions by some Oxford Saxonists to these volumes has been discussed by Murphy (1982). They include *Exequiæ Desideratissimo Principi Gulielmo Glocestriæ Duci*, with contributions by William Elstob (1673–1715) and Humfrey Wanley (1672–1726; see Lucas 2024a, 556; entry for “1700.2”). Elstob also contributed an Anglo-Saxon verse composition to *Pietas Universitatis Oxoniensis in Obitum Augustissimi Regis Gulielmi III. et Gratulatio in Exoptatissimam Serenissimæ Annæ Reginæ Inaugurationem* (University of Oxford 1702, sig. K2r; Carter 1975, 441, no. 11).² Thwaites’s contribution, his only one of this kind, has been overlooked, no reference to it having been found in any subsequent scholarship. It laments the death of Queen Mary II, an event that also occasioned a plethora of poems of remembrance in English, there being forty-three separate items in Rawson (1695).³ The corresponding university publication is *Pietas Universitatis Oxoniensis in Obitum Augustissimæ & Desideratissimæ Reginæ Mariæ*, also of 1695, and it is in this book that Thwaites’s contribution is found (Carter 1975, 426, no. 14). It is called “Carmen Anglo-Saxonicum stylo Cædmoniano scriptum” and occurs on sig. 2G2r.

² For Elstob’s unpublished efforts at Old English verse composition see Murphy (1982, 28–33). For these exercises as part of the contribution to Anglo-Saxon Studies at Oxford, see Fairer (1986, especially 815n1).

³ All are in English except 17b, where Rawson and Robert Smith each contribute a Latin verse, and 41, a Latin elegy “out of the Oxford Verse,” which is “sett to Musick by . . . Henry Purcell.”

**Text: *Carmen Anglo-Saxonicum stylo Cædmoniano scriptum*,
“Anglo-Saxon poem written in Cædmonian style”**

The text is presented in verses or half-lines and I reproduce that format here in the left-hand column, with a Modern English rendering of my own to the right of it.

	Eala þu ea-land	Oh you island
	Gepwogen rynum	washed with flow of water
	Ac garsecgas yðum	and waves of the sea.
	Eala ge buendas	Oh you dwellers,
5	Wif 7 wæpned-cyn	women and men,
	Wlance 7 heane	proud and lowly,
	Heofiað 7 weopað:	you lament and weep.
	Nu si gehyred	Now are heard
	Wop 7 þotorung:	weeping and wailing.
10	Maria god cwen	Mary the good queen,
	Idesa scinost	beautiful lady,
	Wifa wlitigost	fairest of women,
	Ær on Breotene	used to reign over the British
	Miclum mihtum rixode	with mighty power,
15	Sittend on cene-setle	sitting on the throne
	Gelic Æðelflæde	like Æthelflæd,
	Myrcna hlæfdige	lady of the Mercians,
	Domfæstum 7 gedæftum:	judicious and gentle.
	Eallenge Maria sweltað	Mary is utterly lifeless,
20	Wundad deaðes wunde:	Struck down by death.
	Loca Willelm cyning	See how King William,
	Sigefæstest 7 gleawest	triumphant and wise,
	Wepð Marian	mourns Mary,
	Hys gemæcccean	his wife,
25	Mode hefigum	with a heavy heart
	Ac dreorigum:	and a sad one.
	Us is riht micel–	It is our onerous duty
	Orlæg heofian:	to lament [her] fate.
	Cwen forlætað eorðan	The queen relinquishes the earth,
30	Wæg-farand roderum:	a seafarer in the heavens.
	Uton swiðe gesælig	Let us [be] very blessed,
	Wuldorfæst 7 wlitig	glorious and radiant,
	Hæbbað gleam 7 dream	[now that] we have joy and gladness
	Engla þreatum	among the throngs of the English,

- 35 Wuldres bearnum the children of glory,
 Awa to aldre: for ever and ever.

Notes

3, 26: *Ac* functioning as a simple connective is not common in Old English (see *DOE*, s.v. *ac*, G, where all the examples are prosaic except one).

34: In the context of an Old English poem such as *Genesis*, *Engla preatum* would normally mean “with/among the throngs of angels,” but in the context of Thwaites’s verse, *Engla* seems more likely to be genitive of *Engle* “English.” Formally the verse is ambiguous. Possibly a *double entendre* is intended.

Analysis

Qua Old English verse, this offering has faults and merits. The most fundamental flaw is the failure to link verses into whole lines by alliteration. Evidently Thwaites’s grasp of Old English metre was limited, and no blame can attach where no guidance was available. The first scholar to mark alliteration as an important part of Old English verse structure was John J. Conybeare in 1814, when he printed extracts from *The Grave* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 343) and the Exeter Book with italics used to indicate consonants “that seem to have formed the metrical alliteration” (Conybeare 1814, 173). The first scholar to state that alliteration (including vowels) was fundamental to Germanic verse was Rasmus Rask (1787–1832), whose views were made known by Benjamin Thorpe in his *Grammar of the Anglo-Saxon Tongue*, based on Rask’s *Angelsaksisk Sproglære* (1817), and published in 1830 (Thorpe 1830, 135; cited by Aarsleff [1967] 1979, 183–84). But before Thwaites, Franciscus Junius did exhibit considerable intuitive understanding of Old English metrics, as his transcript of *Judith* in particular shows (Lucas 2024b, 171–204). Even though Thwaites edited *Judith* in his *Heptateuch* volume (1698) from Junius’s transcript, Junius’s intuitive understanding of Old English metrics died with him in 1677 and was not passed on. Thwaites printed *Judith* set out as prose (as in the original manuscript), but while he reproduced the metrical points in Junius’s transcript, he failed to reproduce the extended spaces also used to mark metrical divisions.⁴ In the light of the present verse composition being set

⁴ See Lucas (2024b, 184–85). These extended spaces have since been studied in *The Wanderer* and samples from *Beowulf* by Burns (2022), where she concludes that the extended spaces reflect the scribe’s intuitive sense of verse form rather than metrical punctuation as such; as a scholar Junius would have thought of the extended spaces as evidence of verse structure. For those outside the UK the allusion in Burns’s title, “Mind the Gap,” refers to the ubiquitous warning in British railway stations to mind the gap between the train and the platform.

out as verse (in half-lines), and printed at an earlier date than the *Heptateuch*, my previous suggestion that Thwaites failed to realize that *Judith* was verse might be considered to be reinforced.

Of the thirty-six verses in Thwaites's commemorative poem, twenty-nine (over 80 percent) can be scanned, but these include three verses of Type 3A, not a regular type, and obligatory double alliteration is lacking in verses 9, 10, 17 and 30.⁵ Several verses are indeed the same as verses in the so-called Cædmonian poems, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, and *Christ and Satan*:⁶ *Us is riht micel* (27) = *Genesis* 1a; *Wuldres bearnum* (35) = *Genesis* 11b; *Hæbbað gleam & dream* (33) = *Genesis* 12b; *Idesa scinost* (11) = *Genesis B* 626, 704, 821; *Wifa wlitegost* (12) = *Genesis B* 627, 701, 822; *Awa to aldre* (36) = *Exodus* 425a. *Engla þreatum* (34) is probably modelled on *engla þreatas* at *Genesis* 13b. Verses beginning *Eala* could have been modelled on *Christ and Satan* 166. One verse, *Wlance 7 heane* (6) matches *Metres of Boethius* 17.6. Oddly, a high proportion of the verses that match Cædmonian models occur towards the end of the piece, as if Thwaites's grasp, or at least the need to play safe, was developing as he went along.

Other verses have been adapted from genuine Old English models but without universal success. *Wuldorfæst 7 wlitig* (32) is probably modelled on *wlitig 7 wuldorfæst* (*Daniel* 285a), and it scans 1A*3 with obligatory double alliteration, so no problems there. But *Dom-fæstum 7 gedæftum* (18), probably influenced by *domfæst and gedefe* (*Genesis* 1287a), introduces an extra syllable after *domfæst*, and that makes it impossible to scan the verse regularly. *Ac garsecges yðum* (3) is probably an attempt to mimic *garsecges deop* and *garsecges gin* (*Exodus* 281, 431) but the verse is too heavy to scan. *Sigefæstest 7 gleawest* (22) may have been influenced by *sigefæst and snottor* (*Descent into Hell* 23a), if it was available, but adding the superlative suffix to *sigefæst* foils normal scansion. At line 15 *Sittend on cene-setle* would scan as Type 1A2 if *-stol* were substituted for *-setle*, but the obligatory double alliteration is lacking; as it stands it fails to scan. At line 16, *Gelic Æðelflæde* fails to scan as it is, but if the word-order were reversed to **Æðelflæde gelic*, the verse would scan as Type 3E*2 and show more idiomatic Old English verse word-order; indeed, the word order in the piece often reflects Modern English practice.

⁵ I follow the metrical notation of Bliss (1962). For a clear presentation of the verse types richly illustrated, see Bliss (1995).

⁶ Available in the edition by Junius (1655); see also Lucas ([1655] 2000).

Conclusion

As a whole the piece is commemorative and resembles the later verse found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, such as the *Death of Edgar*. Its ideological tone shows recognition of the nation state. Aspects of style such as the frequent use of inflectional rhyme (*rynum/yðum* 2/3; *scinost/wlitegost* 11/12; *hefigum/dreorigum* 25/26; *þreatum/bearnum* 34/35), and doublets (*Heofiað ⁊ weopað* 7; *Domfæstum ⁊ gedæftum* 18; *Sigefæstest ⁊ gleawest* 22; *Wuldorfæst ⁊ wlitig* 32) also accord with the usage of the later poems in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* rather than that of the so-called Cædmonian poems. It is a brave effort at Old English verse composition. As far as I know Thwaites did not attempt such an exercise again.

Metre apart, the poem shows a careful development of thought from universal grief to family loss followed by the queen's departure for heaven, which allows rejoicing amongst the blessed nation of the English. It is what might be expected from Thwaites as a priest in the Church of England. Joy and gladness amongst the English may be a veiled allusion to the Protestant ascendancy that accompanied the Glorious Revolution of 1688.⁷

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