Old English Poetry

Background

Old English is among the oldest vernacular languages to be written down. Writing in Old English began as a practical necessity in the aftermath of the Danish invasions which led to a drop in Latin literacy. King Alfred the Great (849–899) noted that while very few could read Latin, many could still read Old English. He thus proposed that students be educated in Old English, and that those who excelled would go on to learn Latin. This is why many of the texts that have survived are teaching and student-oriented texts. Alfred's influence also explains why the most common dialect for written OE is that of Wessex.

In terms of poetry, only 30,000 lines survive. **Caedmon, Bede, King Alfred** are the only named poets about whom we have any information. Virtually all other poems are anonymous.

Caedmon is the best-known and considered the father of Old English poetry. He lived at the abbey of Whitby in Northumbria in the seventh century. Only a single nine line poem remains, called **Caedmon's *Hymn***, which is also the oldest surviving text in English. This was recorded by the Venerable Bede in his History of the English Church (story)

The Old English poetry which has received the most attention deals with the Germanic heroic past. The longest (3,182 lines), and most important, is ***Beowulf*****,** which tells the story of a legendary Geatish hero. The story is set in Sweden and Denmark, and the tale likewise probably is of Scandinavian origin. Beowulf is historical, heroic, and Christian, even though it relates pre-Christian history. It sets the tone for much of the rest of Old English poetry. It has achieved national epic status in British literary history, comparable to The *Iliad* of Homer, and still attracts the interest of historians, writers, and students the world over.

The 325 line poem ***Battle of Maldon*** celebrates Earl Byrhtnoth and his men who fell in battle against the Vikings in 991. It is considered one of the finest Old English heroic poems. Sadly, both the beginning and end are missing and the only manuscript was destroyed in a fire in 1731.

The Ruin tells of the decay of a once glorious city of Roman Britain, possibly Bath (Britain fell into decline after the Romans departed in the early fifth century); in ***The Wanderer*****,** an older man talks about an attack that happened in his youth, in which his close friends and kin were all killed. Another similar poem is ***The Seafarer***, the story of a sombre exile on the sea, from which the only hope of redemption is the joy of heaven.

One of the most beautiful of all Old English poems is the ***Dream of the Rood***. It is a dream-vision, a common genre of Anglo-Saxon poetry in which the narrator of the poem experiences a vision in a dream only to awake from it renewed at the poem's end. In the *Dream of the Rood*, the dreamer dreams of Christ on the cross, and during the vision the cross itself comes alive and speaks. The dreamer resolves to trust in the cross, and the dream ends with a vision of heaven.

Style and technique

Anglo-Saxon poetry does not create rhythm through the techniques of meter and rhyme, which are utilized by most other Western European languages and are derived from Classical (Latin) poetry. Instead, Anglo-Saxon poetry creates rhythm through a unique system of **stress and alliteration**. Syllables are not *counted* as they are in traditional European meters, but instead the length of the line is determined by a pattern of stressed syllables that begin with the same consonant cluster. The result of this style of poetry is a harsher, more guttural sound and a rhythm that sounds rather like a chant. Remember that though we are dealing here with written fragments, poetry in Saxon times was still largely an oral craft, and our understanding of it in written form is incomplete; for example, we know that the poet (referred to as the *Scop*) could be accompanied by a harp. Although almost all the fragments we possess appear to be written prose (i.e. they do not look like poems as we understand the term), it is clear from the alliteration and stress patterns that the works are indeed poetry. One can see a strictly repeated pattern of **two rhythmical, alliterative half lines, separated by a *caesura***, or pause. This pause may be the place where the person reciting or chanting the poem strummed a harp; we simply don't know.

The Anglo-Saxons also used a figure of speech known as a **kenning.** A kenning substitutes a noun with two other words that, when compounded together, describe the substituted noun. They are metaphorical rather than literal (Old English poetry uses many such metaphorical phrases, but very few similes and barely ever an extended simile). For instance, "wave-vat" is a kenning for "ocean," and "battle-torch" is used in place of "sword" (and more specifically, a sword that has been sharpened until it shines like a torch).

Here is part of a translation of "Beowulf" is by the poet Seamus Heaney

*The monster **w**renched and **w**restled with him*
*but Beowulf was **m**indful of his **m**ighty strength,*
*the wondrous **g**ifts **G**od had showered on him:*
*He re**l**ied for help on the **L**ord of All,*
*on **H**is care and favour. So **h**e overcame the foe,*
***b**rought down the hell-**b**rute.*

JRR Tolkein was one of the greatest masters of Old English poetry and as well as translating a great deal of existing poetry, also created some of his own. Examples of this can be found in The Lord of the Rings, particularly in the songs of Rohan e.g.*Riding Song of Rohirrim*

*A**r**ise now, arise, **R**iders of Théoden!*
***F**ell deeds awake: **fi**re and slaughter!*
***s**pear shall be shaken, **sh**ield be splintered,*
*a sword-day, a **r**ed day, e**r**e the sun rises!*
***R**ide now, ride now! **R**ide to Gondor!*
Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!

Writing your own Old English Poetry

The Old English poetic line consists of two rhythmical half-lines which alliterate, separated by a . *caesura*, or pause. Here is a modern example:

Much have we heard	of **m**ighty Sceafa.
Modig the coward	**m**urdered that king;
The **tr**ibute-thane	**tr**easure coveted.

1. Alliteration

There are a few simple rules about alliteration in Old English:

1. Alliteration *always* occurs on **stressed** syllables
2. All vowels alliterate with each other. Eager alliterates with apple, both of which alliterate with owl.
3. A consonant alliterates with itself and with the consonant blends which it begins. In other words, *s* alliterates with *sh, sk, sl , sw,* etc.: serve, shield, skill, sleek, and swift are considered to be alliterative.

Exercise 1: Give three words that alliterate with the following words. mead, water, ever, sword, grim

Exercise 2: Create 5 alliterative phrases. *Examples*: worthy warrior, mighty mountain, etc.

2. Metre

Old English poetry does not have the regular, heart-beatish rhythm or *meter* that most later English poetry does. Instead, Old English poetry has several specific metrical patterns for the half-lines. The (/) means a stressed or accented syllable; the (~) means an unstressed or unaccented syllable. Here are the most common stress patterns:

A. / ~ / ~ Modig Murderer
B. ~ / ~ / the king enthroned
C. ~ / / ~ his word-weaving
D. / / ~ ~ fierce death bringer
E. /~ ~ / skilled in the fight

A, D and E are the most common.

Some important things to remember about composing a half-line:

1. You must have **two** stressed syllables in each half-line. If you have only one, the half-line is incomplete. .
2. While you must have two stressed syllables, you may have *as many* unstressed syllables as you like, though two to four is usually enough!

Exercise 3: Compose a half-line using each of the types above.

3. Putting it all together

Here, things become complicated. Old English poetic lines consist of two half-lines put together. So to write an Old English poetic line, you must join two half-lines. Simple enough so far. However, you also have to make these lines alliterate in a certain way. Once you put two half-lines together, you will have a poetic line with four stressed beats. e.g.:

knights on **h**orseback/ listened to the **h**orn

Now, *horseback* and *horn* do alliterate. In Old English poetry, however, the ***third*** stressed syllable (that is, the first stressed syllable in the second part) **MUST** alliterate with either the first or the second stressed syllable (i.e. those in the first half). *This rule is iron-clad; if you break it, you are not doing Old English poetry correctly.* A more correct version of the line above would be:

Knights on **h**orseback **h**eard war-soundings

Some things to remember when putting the poetic lines together:

1. Don't use two half-lines of the same rhythm type in the same poetic line. It can be done: it is considered to show a lack of poetic finesse.
2. Remember, *the third stressed syllable of the line must alliterate with the first or second stressed syllable*. You may alliterate the third stress with both the first *and* second.

Exercise 4: Put some of your half-lines from Exercise 3 together to make full lines. If they don't work together, try creating some new half-lines that will work.