Alliterative Poetry
Lady Teleri the Well-Prepared
Sergeants and Scholars, May 17, 2014

Class Overview
We will discuss the rules of Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetic composition, some of the other stylistic conventions, and some of the themes it was used in period to address. Towards the end of the first hour, we will pause to try and write poems.

Your class handout also contains information on performance in Anglo-Saxon England, because I had it written up from 2009. Bonus!

Note: My focus is on Anglo-Saxon England and its arts. However, the Old Norse eddic poetry form called fornyrðislag is very, very similar. This is the form used in the Poetic Edda to tell the tales of the gods and heroes, not the skaldic forms used to praise or scorn people. The main differences are:
- Old Norse poetry tends to be written in stanzas (of 2-8 lines, no size is mandatory) rather than the continuous verse of Old English
- Old Norse poetry likes to finish its thoughts and ideas within a line; Old English poetry makes frequent use of enjambment

> English writers   wordy men they
> Continue thoughts   though line ended
>
> Norse poets   need endings.
> One thought   to one line.

- Old Norse poetry sometimes dispenses with the unstressed syllables in the lines altogether. Old English poetry keeps them in.

> In Old English   often kept sounds
> Old Norse   leaves out

Poetic Composition
Anglo-Saxon poetry is unrhymed. It relies on alliteration and patterns of stress to give it a formal structure. The seminal analysis of the poetic corpus that gives us our understanding of Anglo-Saxon poetic meter is E. Sievers's[1]. I have not yet gotten a copy of Sievers and have relied instead on the frequently-cited essay by Scragg[2], which summarizes it. Except where noted, the following is a summary of Scragg's rules.

Stress Patterns
Poetic lines in Old English poems are divided into two roughly equal parts. Each half-line is composed of two strongly stressed syllables (known as lifts) and a variable number of lightly stressed syllables (known as falls). These lifts and falls can be arranged into the five "Sievers types," five (actually six) stress patterns.

Type A: The lifts precede the falls. Scagg gives the example (with / indicating a lift and x indicating a fall):

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/        x  /   x   /   x   /   x
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Ma-ry, **Ma**-ry, **quite** con-**tra**-ry   (This is a complete line, made of two Type A half-lines)

Type A is the most common type.

Type B: Type B is the reverse of Type A; the fall precedes the lift.

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x  /  x  /  x  /   x  /
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To **be** or **not** to **be**, that **is**

Type C: Type C has two lifts one after the other, with falls before and after:
x / / x, "the next morning," "(in a) brief letter" (Examples from Nash.)

Types D and E make use of half-stresses, which occur often in Old English as the second part of a compound word. We can hear the difference in Modern English as well: Scragg recommends listening for the difference between "a blackbird" and "a black bird." In "a black bird," the "black" is strongly stressed, but the other two words are unstressed. In "a blackbird," black is still the most strongly-stressed syllable, but "bird" takes more stress than "a." It is a half-stress. The half-stress is denoted as \.

Type D: There are two variants of Type D, Da and Db. Both start with two lifts and end with a fall and a half-stress; they are differentiated based in where the half-stress goes:
Type Da: / / \ x, "Queen's godchildren," "few firefighters"
Type Db: / / x \, "next market day"
(Examples from Nash)

Type E: Type E begins and ends with lifts, with the half-stress and fall in between:
/ \ x /, "headlong in flight," "God help the poor" (Example from Nash)

Scragg notes that, even in the original Old English, there could be some variations in execution. For example, Type A lines are sometimes preceded by an unstressed syllable or two.

Most poetic lines would be composed of two half-lines of different types, but this was hardly a universal rule. Scragg gives a ten-line example from *Beowulf* that contains three lines with structure AA.

A single sentence would often run over many poetic lines, and the poet could use these types over the entire poetic idea to create effects. Types A, B and C, for example, containing roughly equal numbers of lifts and falls, move along quickly in recitation and might be suitable for narrative. Types D and E, using the half-stresses, require the speaker to pause a bit (to give the appropriate stress) and can be used to heighten drama.

Alliteration
The lines were bound together by alliteration, or the use of similar sounds. The third lift (the first stress of the second half-line) must alliterate with either the first or second lift in the first half-line[3]. All three *may* alliterate. It is important to note that it is the *stressed* syllables that must alliterate, not necessarily the first letters. So "AtLANtia" alliterates with words starting with "L," not "A".

Sometimes, poets would use the fourth lift to anticipate the next line, so that it alliterated with either the first or second lift. This is not a requirement, but it certainly has the effect of tying the two lines together closely and moving the listener along.

There are also, occasionally, other exceptions to this rule. There are surviving examples of the stresses alliterating in patterns *abab* and, even less frequently, *abba*.

Scragg does not give a rule for what constitutes alliteration. Nash gives evidence that all vowels are considered alliterative with each other[3]. A University of Conneticuit website asserted that consonant combinations also alliterated: that not only did "sick" alliterate with "soap," but also with "start," "snake," and "ship."[4] Old English had separate letters for "t", "th" as in "this" and "th" as in "thigh." I would not alliterate these different sounds with each other.

Other Structures and Features
Variation: Old English verse frequently repeats the same noun or verb, calling it by different names: "A rich ring-giver, a bold battler, a good king."

Compund words: Like Modern English and German, a poet could concatenate two words to make a new word, such as "wynleas," "joy-lack."

Kennings: If the compound, or a phrase, is allusive, it can be termed a kenning. They are sometimes described as being mini-riddles. The famous textbook example of a kenning is the "hronrad," "whale-road" as a name for the ocean. "Moncynnes weard," mankind's warder, is God.

Hypermetric verses: Sometimes, the Anglo-Saxon poets preceded one of the five half-line types with extra syllables. If they precede the first half of a line, the extra syllables may contain one alliterative syllable, but not if they precede the second half-line. Some poems, like *Judith* and the *Dream of the Rood*, alternate between normal verses and hypermetric lines.

Refrains: Two Old English poems, *Deor* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, make use of a repeated line as a kind of refrain; in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, it is only a half-line.

Themes
Old English poetry spans many thematic topics. It is best known for its depictions of war and warriors (*Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon, The Finnesburg Fragment, Judith*), melancholy wisdom (*The Seafarer, The Wanderer, The Wife's Lament*, *Deor*) and its clever (and occasionally ribald) riddles. They also touch on love (*The Husband's Message, Wulf and Eadwacer*), religion or faith (*The Dream of the Rood, Judith*, various translations of Bible passages into verse), and a sort of historical catalgoue (*Widsith*). The poems of melancholy wisdom often feature exile or separation as a major reason for the melancholy. There are lyrics (concerning emotions) and narratives (concerning stories). The poetic "I," if present, can be male (*Seafarer, Wanderer, Deor, Widsith*), female (*Wulf and Eadwacer, Wife's Lament*), or an object (many of the riddles, *Husband's Message*, *Dream of the Rood*).

Word Choice
Be aware of the pedigree of the words you use. Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon style sounds best when it is full of Germanic-rooted words rather than Latin-rooted ones. (But I admit that I have never been able to get away from "glory," for instance, from Latin "gloria;" our language is heavily influenced by French and there's just no getting around it sometimes.) Try to date the concepts you are using: "chivalry" is born in th 12th century or so and comes to full flower in the centuries following, well after the Battle of Hastings. The same is true of courtly love and other High Middle Ages poetic themes. These ideas fit less well into the Anglo-Saxon poetic framework; they're anachronistic for it.

Examples
From "Hereward's Crown," original poem by Teleri

Woe to the **Eng**lish	**Wi**lliam has **con**quered (A A)
The **Nor**mans **come**	with **kn**ife-edged **p**ain (B B)
Plunder and **pi**llage;	our **pat**ronage **lost** (A B)
Fenland **ab**bot	from **France** will **come** (A B)
Hereward, **He**ro	**h**igh-*born* brave **man** (A E)
He was in **ex**ile	when **Hast**ings was **lost** (A B)

Syllables in bold are stressed. Blue letters show the alliterating sounds. The red letters are an example of linking one line to the next. The Sievers types are in parenthesis to the right. You can see where I could stand to mix up my metrical patterns a bit.

From a metrical translation of "Wulf and Eadwacer," 10th cen poem, by Teleri

To my **peo**ple he is **like**	a **pr**esent one **gives** (B B)
Him *they* will **kill**	if he **comes** to their **camp** (E B)
Una**like** it **is** for **us** *(see note)*	
Wolf on one **is**land,	**I** on a**noth**er (A A)
Fast is that **is**land	by **fens** sur**round**ed (A B)
Blood-thirsty *men*	a**bide** on that **is**land (Db B)

Him *they* will **ki**ll   if he **comes** to their **camp** (E B)
Una**like** it **is** for **us**

This is a later poem. It features a repeated half-line, here translated at "Unalike it is for us", as a refrain. The original is "unge**lic** is **us**." As it is only a half-line, it doesn't alliterate with anything. I liked the original so much I did a very close translation, but ended up with an extra stressed syllable as a result. That makes this a hypermetric (half) line.

Performance

There is little absolute knowledge about Anglo-Saxon performance, and nearly all of it comes from later Christian sources. Many of the sources are fictional or poetic in nature, adding to our uncertainty. However, based on textual, archaeological and iconographic information, as well as the study of living cultures with similar features (oral performance of epics, praise poetry or ritual boasting), we can establish some plausible principles. Spoken word, chant and song are all possible modes of delivery, and accompaniment on harp or lyre (by the poet or by another performer) may be used.

Sources

Lewis Flint Anderson, in his 1903 Master's thesis, covered most of the available textual sources that give clues to performance practice[5]. Many scholars are in the habit of going as far back as Tacitus's *Germania*, citing his accounts of the performances of the Germanic tribes to hypothesize about how their descendants, the Anglo-Saxons, may have performed. Contemporarily, the poems *Beowulf*, *Widsith* and *Deor* contain references to the courtly performer, the scop, and his art. (The scop is not the only kind of performer in Anglo-Saxon England, but he is the kind for which we have the most evidence.) Anderson paints a portrait of a history-keeper, an enforcer of community values, who performs for his lord with voice and "harp."

Jeff Opland studied the Xhosa people of Africa, who have an oral tradition that includes praise poetry, much as the Anglo-Saxons appeared to have had[6]. Opland covers much of the same ground that Anderson did earlier, but his comparison with a living tradition offers some interesting contrast. The Xhosa exclusively recite their praise poetry - it is always spoken, never sung. Opland goes to some lengths to attempt to show that this was true for the Anglo-Saxons as well, carefully parsing out every sentence that mentions the scop and his *hearpe* to show that none of them explicitly state that music and poetry are happening concurrently. If this is true, it is also true that none of them explicitly state that music and poetry are occurring sequentially, either.

Who Were the Performers?

Regular Joes: In his "A History of the English Church and People," the Venerable Bede tells the story of Caedom the cowherd. Caedom worked at a monastery as a lay brother, tending cows. Every evening, he and the other workers would gather after supper and pass a harp around and sing. Caedom didn't have anything to sing, so he'd go and run off to the cow shed when it was his turn. (Until he miraculously dreamed a poem about the Creation and continued to compose poetry to the glory of God, but that's beside our point.) We see here a collection of regular, uneducated working men amusing themselves with voice and instrument. (Caedmon's poem had to be written down by the monks, because the cowherd was himself illiterate.) This is a fine model for someone who just wants to dabble in poetry or the bardic arts.

Gleomen: Different laws and sermons refer to gleomen, usually unhappily. These inciters to vice could be found in ale-houses and other gathering places, playing songs for money. When the money ran out, they'd move on. They were professional entertainers, and one imagines that their repertoire would be tuned to extract maximum cash from a workaday audience. A typical SCA bard, working with a primary goal of entertaining an audience, might take this as a historical model.

Scops: Scops were court poets. In addition to entertaining their lord and his war-band, the scop was a keeper of tradition, a guardian of community values, and a mouthpiece for the lord. He recited the lord's grand lineage and the great deeds of his ancestors. He praised the warriors who had fought well, doubling their glory and encouraging the other men to keep up. Using the scop as a model for SCA performance would slant subject matter to court business: poems of praise for those in the barony, collecting and reciting baronial history, and so on.

What Can You Do with Your Voice?
Reciting
The most basic thing to do with poetry is to recite it aloud. *Beowulf* has been analyzed according to oral-formulaic theory and been found to have features that mark it as a previously) oral poem.

When reciting aloud:
- **Slow down.** Poetry is a stylized way of speaking or writing, and if you recite it at regular speaking speed, your listeners will not have time to decode your words. Let your meaning sink into their minds.
- **Be an actor.** Vary your tempo (speaking speed) to fit the text. Vary your pitch or intonation to suit emotional changes in the text. Move your body to represent two or more speakers in a narrative poem. A flat one-speed monotone, delivered straight at the audience, will probably not be a good performance.
- **Practice.** Just because it's "just talking" doesn't mean you don't need to rehearse it.
- **Project**. Supported speaking, "from the diaphragm," will do wonders for adding presence and command to your voice. It will also help it carry in the hall.

Singing
You can also sing. The trick here is that, unlike most songs we are used to, Anglo-Saxon poems don't have a handy verse-refrain structure - or even a regular meter. You will have to *through-compose* - that is, write music from the start of the poem to the end, probably without repeating much of it. What *kind* of music to write could be its own class. A reasonable guess is "in Dorian mode," if you know what that means. Otherwise, "in a minor key" is close - played slowly, it'll sound a little sad or spooky. Played briskly, it sounds antique - "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" is in a minor key.

The same performance practices listed for speaking apply to singing as well.

Chanting
Chanting comes in between singing and reciting. It is little heard today, outside of some religious practices, and might be broadly categorized as "a song with almost no melody." A typical (Christian) chant will start at a home or tonic note, rise up to a "reciting tone," and stay there for most of a poetic line. There might be small variations around the reciting tone. Towards the end of the poetic line, the tone might ascend or descend. At the end of the poem, the tone comes back down to tonic.

Other examples of chanting, such as Hollywood interpretations of magic spells, again usually heavily emphasis one reciting tone. They may also employ a strong sense of rhythm, generally a repeated rhythm, that won't work for Anglo-Saxon poetry.

This is a performance mode not often heard in the SCA and it might be interesting to experiment with.

Things You Can Make Music On
Lyres and Harps
The earliest depiction of a frame harp in western Europe comes from 8th century Scotland, on a carved Pictish stone. Manuscript illuminations of them can be found in the 9th century Utrect psalter, produced in northern France.

The Monifeith Pictish stone, c. 700-900 CE.

Carving on the Duppin Cross in Scotland, c. 800 CE.

An ambitious performer from the Utrecht Psalter, c. 816-835 CE. While it's not clear if this harp has a forepillar, others in the psalter definitely do.

Archaeological finds at Sutton Hoo, Trossingen and Prittlewell have uncovered lyres, and they also appear in manuscript depictions of King David composing the psalms. (The Vespasian psalter, below, is probably the most famous of these.)
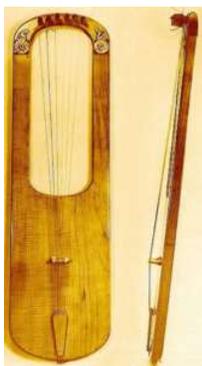
The Sutton Hoo lyre, as reconstructed by the British Museum.
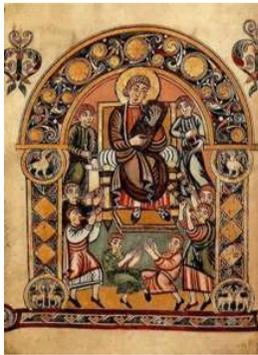
The Vespasian Psalter page showing David on lyre

The Old English word *hearpe* may have referred to the lyre or to both instruments. Certainly, before the harp existed, it must have referred to the lyre. It is generally accepted that the *hearpe* is the lyre, although some authors do disagree and believe that it refers to the harp. Certainly, harps appeared to gain more popularity as time went on, and lyres fell out of use. In general, a lyre would be more appropriate for an earlier-era performance, or a more traditional or courtly performance during the transitional period of the 7-8th centuries. The new interloper instrument is more appropriate later in the Anglo-Saxon period, and for less traditional transition-era pieces. But lyres clearly survived even into the 9th century, as seen below.

By lucky happenstance, an 9th century treatise on music theory written by a cleric named Hucbald has survived[7]. In explaining the musical scale known as the hexachord (which is structured "do re mi fa so la"), he likens it to the tuning of the lyre. Although other tunings are possible - and a six-stringed instrument would suggest a pentatonic tuning ("do re fa so la do") in many cultures - this one is historically documentable.

Work by SCA researchers Greg and Carol Priest-Dorman in the early 1990s provided good iconographic evidence for a "block and strum" playing technique[8]. Occasional plucking of the strings is not ruled out and the size and placement of the hand-hole suggests that blocking and plucking a string to get overtones may have been done. (Indeed, the Wincombe Psalter shows a lyre-player - standing behind King David on frame harp - who appears to be plucking. This also shows that the memory of the instruments co-existed; whether or not they were ever actually played together in that fashion, along with the bowed rote, whistle and clackers also shown, is debatable.) Music theory of the era supports a tendency to play in Dorian mode, with a drone on tonic being a plausible accompaniment[9].

King David and musicians, from the Winchcombe Psalter (9th cen). David plays a triangular harp, but the musician on the right has a lyre.

Harps of the era were quite small, generally depicted (there are no surviving instruments) with twelve or fewer strings. It has been noted that this is about the range of the untrained human voice, and some hypothesize that one performance modality would have been simply doubling the melody on harp and voice[10]. Irish harps were singled out in 1180s by Giraldus Cambrensis as having brass strings[11], suggesting that gut strings were the norm elsewhere.

Flutes[12]

You clearly can't recite poetry and play a flute at the same time (although you might partner with someone!). But you could provide a prelude, interlude or postlude on a flute. Bone flutes have survived, carved from long leg-bones of deer and swans. They are all fipple flutes, and most have only three holes. They seem to be the kind of thing folks might carve out for fun rather than professional instruments. (Author's opinion there, not fact.) A plain fipple flute would do; a recorder is a later instrument but in a similar vein. A penny whistle is in the same family, and has similar humble origins, but is a 19th century instrument.

Percussion[12]

Amazingly, we have no evidence for drums. Bells, bones (played like spoons) and finger or tong cymbals were known. There were also "written references to 'rattle-sticks' (O.E. *cladersticca*), although it is not clear whether these are percussion instruments, or whether they are perhaps just a baby's rattle." Clapping was certainly possible.

Instruments in Performance

Wind instruments, unless played by a partner, can only perform preludes, interludes or postludes. If you are singing, you might echo some of the music you have sung on your flute. If you are not, you might play some "incidental" music.

I am not a percussionist. But two things to do with drums present themselves: One, to use the drum to accent the stressed syllables in the poem. (But be careful not to drum out your own words!) Two, to set up a regular drum-beat to contrast the poetry's rhythms with. That might get... complicated to listen to.

Stringed instruments represent many opportunities. Like wind instruments, you can play them separately from speaking, singing or chanting. But you can also play them while you speak, sing or chant. Simple is good - you want the focus on the poetry. Repeated themes, simple open intervals, or absent-minded "noodling" may all be used. I have found the textbook claim[13] that the lyre was strummed in the caesura - the break between the first and second halves of the line - to fail in performance. The line-halves are linked by alliteration - breaking them with a pause to strum defeats the purpose. Much better to strum or pluck on the stressed syllables, or underlie the entire line with quiet music.

If you are singing, you can mirror all or part of your melody on your stringed instrument. It's been noted that the

small ranges of early harps are around the range of an untrained voice, and those cowherds passing the lyre or harp around may have been using it to help keep themselves on-key. You can also play harmony or other accompaniment, as you like. (Early period music theory is another class!)

Attempting to reconstruct Anglo-Saxon music is a research project itself, and the results will always be conjectural. However, some guesses are more likely than others. The Viking Answer Lady (Christie Ward) has a great page summarizing work done on reconstructing Viking music[14]. Since the source material is so scarce, and since Anglo-Saxons and 'Vikings' share ethnic roots and lived contemporaneous (and were even neighbors at times), researchers typically draw on evidence from either to support their own area of interest. Looking at this page may give you ideas on how or where to start looking for ideas for your own reconstructions.

Performance Modalities

Most of us, literates that we are, are comfortable performing in a very literary mode. We have a fixed text, which we memorize. We may have a fixed musical score, which we memorize. Then, we reproduce it as a performance. Variations from the fixed, memorized text and score are mistakes.

This is a very good way to approach Anglo-Saxon performance for the first time. It plays to our strengths as modern, literate people, and does not ask us to do things outside of our comfort zones. It is not, however, the only way to perform.

Improvisation plays a major part in many oral cultures. Poets learn to speak a poetic language as we speak natural language, and ideas and phrases from their word-hoards fall from their tongues already formed into poetry. Musical accompaniment, and indeed tunes for melodies, are composed on the spot. Long practice may give them an envelope of sound, a similarity from one performance to the next, but they are never intended to be note-perfectly identical. It goes "something like this."

Improvisation takes practice itself. My preferred starting point is with the music - using simple but "unscripted" music underneath a recited, memorized text.

A dirty little secret: This style of poetry is the one our language, English, developed on its own. All the rhymes and fixed meters came later, after the Norman Conquest and the French takeover of courtly life. Yet, we grow up exposed mostly to romance-derived poetry as "poetry," even from the nursery rhymes of the cradle. That means, while our ears are quick to pick up on the slightest bobble in a regular meter or rhyme scheme - we don't have the same intuition with alliterative poetry. I guarantee you that, if you improvised an alliterative poem and

- Had the fourth lift alliterate instead of the third
- Only had three lifts
- Had five lifts
- Alliterated *aa bb* with no tie between the half-lines

your listening audience *would not know* there was anything wrong.

This does not mean that you should be careless with the poetic rules when you are composing on paper, in the fashion we are most accustomed to. What it does mean is that, if you are taken with the notion to stand up in court and toss off a few lines praising the victor of the day's tournament, you shouldn't sweat it if it isn't letter-perfect.

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