

Early Middle English Evidence for Old English Meter: Resolution in *Poema morale*

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In the twelfth-century Middle English *Poema morale*, perhaps the earliest English composition in a septenary meter, the metrical position at the end of the first hemistich is distinguished from all other positions in admitting a short syllable plus another in a pattern that would disrupt the meter, creating an extra unstressed syllable, if the two were not resolved, as in the word *dede* in the verse *Ic welde more thanne ic dede; | mi wit oh to bi more*. Here resolution seems to have been carried over from Old English into a Middle English isometric meter based on Latin models. This constitutes significant evidence for resolution as a genuine property of Old English verse, which in turn lends strong support to Eduard Sievers's metrical analysis of early Germanic alliterative verse.*

Although there is now as much diversity in the analysis of early Germanic alliterative meters as there ever was, there is probably less disagreement among metrists about fundamental principles than there was formerly. The system of scansion formulated by Sievers (1885, 1893) is not universally accepted, and even those studies guided by Sievers's findings concede that his analysis is theoretically inadequate. Yet to a remarkable extent, the recent literature has been dominated by a point of view that tacitly agrees that any estimable theory must account for the regularities that Sievers observed in verse construction.

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The feature of Sievers's analysis that has provoked the most dissent, in past times as now, is the principle of resolution: a light syllable plus another syllable may serve the same function as one heavy syllable in the verse structure, as illustrated in 1.¹

- (1) a. *beloren* lēofum
 'deprived of loved ones' (Beowulf 1073a: xpxPx)
 = him big stōdon
 'stood by him' (3047a: xPPx)
- b. ðonne wæs ðēos *medoheal*
 'then this mead-hall was' (484a: xxxpxS)
 = þæt þū þone wælgæst
 'that you (would not attack) that murderous spirit'
 (1995a: xxxxPS)
- c. *sundwudu* sōhte
 'sought the sea-wood (i.e. ship)' (208a: PsxPx)
 = *merewīf* mihtig
 'mighty sea-woman' (1519a: pxSPx)

Here the resolved sequence *-loren* (with an open first syllable) in 1073a is assumed to serve the same function as the syllable *big* (heavy because closed) in 3047a, and so forth. More than a few scholars have rejected this principle.² The counterarguments have been given careful consideration and answered effectively by Obst (1987b:20–24) and, especially, Suzuki (1995), and so it is not necessary to go over these issues again in detail. A few of the most compelling of Obst's and Suzuki's reasons may be cited briefly, and attention drawn to some

¹ All examples of Old English verse are cited from the Klaeber (1950) edition of *Beowulf*. The scansion notation is that of Hucheson (1995:7, n.26), with slight modification: P, p = syllable bearing primary stress (heavy and light, respectively); S, s = syllable bearing secondary stress (heavy and light); x = unstressed syllable (weight irrelevant); resolved syllables are italicized.

² The list includes Pipping (1903), Baum (1948/1949), Keyser (1969), Kerling (1982), Hoover (1985), and Golston and Riad (1997). Rather different is the question whether resolution was still an active principle in the historical period of Old English and Old Norse. In private communication, Donka Minkova and Kari Ellen Gade have indicated to me that they are collecting negative evidence in regard to the former and the latter, respectively.

additional considerations. If resolution were not a genuine feature of Old English verse, we would expect a high incidence of verses with a light, unresolved syllable under primary stress:

- (2) a. ***Dena lēodum*
 ‘to the people of the Danes’
 (pXPx ; cf. *Gēata lēodum* ‘to the people of the Geats’)
 (1930b: PXPx)
- b. ***þā betostan*
 ‘the best’
 (xPxx ; cf. *þā sēlestan* ‘the best’) (416a: xPxx)

In fact, such verses are vanishingly rare in the Old English poetic corpus. Countless examples of long stressed syllables occur in such positions, as well as short stressed syllables followed by a resolvable unstressed syllable, but so few verses like those in 2 that it is implausible that the type should have been regarded as normal by Anglo-Saxon poets. Rather, in Old English poetry there is a very general regularity that under primary stress a syllable must be either heavy or resolvable. In this respect the statistics undeniably favor Sievers’s claims.

Hoover (1985:119–148) counters that vanishingly rare patterns of stress and quantity like those in 2 are not much commoner in prose than in poetry, and therefore there is nothing remarkable about the low incidence in verse. Árnason (1991:58–59) applies the same reasoning to *fornyrðislag* in Old Icelandic. A fault of Hoover’s argument, however, is the assumption that prose can be divided into metrical units with beginnings and endings that are determinable as objectively as the beginnings and endings of alliterative verses. As pointed out by Obst (1987a:463), without the constraint of patterns of alliteration, dividing prose into standard prosodic units is excessively subjective. This is no small consideration, given that Hoover’s argument rests on the assumption that the things he perceives as verse types in prose are directly comparable to actual verses, and statistical similarities in the incidence of the two prove something about what patterns should be expected in verse. The incidence of certain patterns of stress and quantity, Hoover assumes, should be comparable in verse and prose when the meter is not artificially regulating the figures. In actuality, the two should not be comparable, for a variety of reasons. For example, “verses” with initial stress should be less common in prose because the syntax of prose is different, particularly in its more liberal use of

demonstratives and other particles that tend to be omitted in the economical style of Old English verse. Even if these were not serious problems, probably most metrists would agree that Hoover's quantitative claims raise more questions than they answer, since there is no apparent reason other than prosodic constraints why patterns like those in 2 should be so rare in either verse or prose, given that corresponding verses with heavy syllables in the relevant position are common. Since it is questionable whether there can be any real objectivity in determining where verse-like units begin and end in prose, Hoover's findings would seem more objective if he were able to offer an explanation why a pattern that ought to be common in prose is, by his reckoning, rare. Otherwise, replacing a principle like resolution, which is well motivated (as discussed below), with an apparently unmotivated one like avoidance of open syllables in a seemingly random set of prosodic patterns seems an instance of explaining the merely disputed by appealing to the wholly unknown.

The other chief objection to Sievers's analysis of resolution is its variable application. In the position immediately after a full lift—that is, a heavy syllable under primary stress—resolution applies in some cases but not others:

- (3) a. With resolution:
 frēowine folca (430a: P_sxP_x)
- b. Without resolution:
 helpan hildfruman (2649a: P_xP_sx)

That the principle must be applied in such a variable manner has made some suspicious.³ To some it suggests subjectivity and opportunities to manipulate the data. But once again Suzuki has offered cogent reasons why Sievers must be right. Simplest and most striking of his evidence are data showing that if resolution is applied without exception, verses of just three metrical positions would have to be regarded as normal:

³ See, among others, Creed (1966, 1990) and Cygan (1968). Even Obst, who sees so clearly why blanket rejections of resolution are untenable, cannot bring himself to accept the variable application of resolution, and he applies the rule instead without exception (1987:21–22).

- (4) a. heard hondlocen
 ‘hard, linked by hand’ (551a: PPs_x, not ** PP_{sx} = ** PPS;
 e.g., **hēah hordburh ‘tall treasure-city’)
- b. on stefn stigon
 ‘climbed (pl.) onto the stem’ (212a: xPp_x, not ** xPp_x = ** xPP;
 e.g., **on stefn stāh ‘climbed [sg.] onto the stem’)
- c. bēagbroden cwēn
 ‘ring-adorned queen’ (623b: PsxP, not ** PsxP = ** PSP;
 e.g., **goldwlan_c wer ‘gold-proud man’)

If resolution were applied to such verses, corresponding verses with one heavy syllable rather than two resolved ones would have to be regarded as standard. Verses of just three syllables then ought to be common in the corpus. In actuality, however, they are so uncommon that they must be regarded as due to some sort of textual corruption.⁴

There is in fact a creditable rationale for the assumption that resolution applies only variably under some conditions. It appears to apply unconditionally under primary stress, as in 1a–b. It does not apply at all under unstressed conditions. Then there is a middle state under secondary stress. Most metrists assume (e.g., Cable 1974:65–74) that when a full stress immediately follows another full stress, the second is subordinated, and this is an eminently reasonable assumption. It is a well-attested pattern in stress-based languages, including Modern English, as in *béekèeper*, *bláckbòard*, *bóokcàse*, etc., where the second element of the compound is fully but secondarily stressed, so that the vowel retains its quality rather than being reduced to [ə]. In this middle state, under secondary stress, it should not be surprising that resolution applies variably.

Confirmation of the variable application of resolution under secondary stress derives from the evidence of Kaluza’s law.⁵

⁴ The influential analysis of Bliss (1967:§85) does permit trisyllabic verses, but since Bliss finds just five verses of this kind in the more than 6,000 verses of *Beowulf*, the genuineness of the type is difficult to credit. In addition, all Bliss’s examples may be explained otherwise (see Fulk 1992:§§205, 276, with references).

⁵ For the initial formulation of the law, see Kaluza 1896. For more recent discussion, see Fulk 1992 and Suzuki 1996:171–275; cf. also Fulk 1998.

Fundamental to an understanding of the law is the distinction between etymologically long and short inflectional endings. Short endings are those made up of a vowel that was either monomoric or subject to shortening in prehistoric Old English; long endings reflect either those with consonantal codas or those that contained Proto-Germanic vowels conventionally called trimoric:

- (5) a. Sample short endings:
 \bar{o} -stem nom. sg. fem. $-u < \text{Gmc. } *-\bar{o}$;
 i -stem nom. sg. masc. $-e < -i < \text{Gmc. } *-iz$
- b. Sample long endings:
 a -stem gen. pl. $-a < \text{Gmc. } *-\hat{o}m$;
 \bar{o} -stem nom. pl. $-a < \text{Gmc. } *-\hat{o}z$;
 and all inflections ending in a consonant.

In *Beowulf*, almost without exception, when resolution is suspended, an etymologically long inflectional ending is involved. By contrast, when resolution does apply under secondary stress—that is, when it applies even though it might have been suspended—the endings involved are etymologically short:⁶

- (6) a. Short endings (with resolution):
 sweordbealu slīðen
 ‘cruel sword-death’ (1147a)
 gilpcwide Gēates
 ‘the Geat’s boast’ (640a)
- b. Long endings (without resolution):
 mundbora wæs
 ‘was protector’ (2779b)
 lāð lyftfloga
 ‘loathsome air-flier’ (2315a)

There are hundreds of such examples in *Beowulf*, and the rule is almost exceptionless, so there can be little doubt of the regularity of its application. With the possible exception of *Exodus*, which is not long

⁶ For metrical purposes in conjunction with Kaluza’s law, initial stress is assumed to be subordinated (and thus secondary) immediately after a syllable bearing primary stress, as with the second-to-last syllable of *nē tō gnēað gifa* (1930a).

enough to afford comparable certainty, *Beowulf* is the only poem that shows this treatment of the short vocalic endings: in the poem there are about a hundred verses of type 6a, and few elsewhere in the Old English poetic corpus. Since *Beowulf* is the only poem to show this treatment of the endings, the law obviously is not in any way required by Sievers's analysis of Old English meter. Thus, the more or less absolute congruence of the distribution of endings with the environments in which Sievers does and does not predict resolution constitutes strong evidence for his analysis (Fulk 1996b:6–7; 1997:41–42). That is, since resolution correlates to the use of short vocalic endings and nonresolution correlates to the use of etymologically long endings, this is strong confirmation of the assumption of variable resolution confined to environments under secondary stress. The chief objection to the variable suspension of resolution—that determining whether or not it applies is subjective and unprincipled—is thus untrue, at least in regard to *Beowulf*.

Moreover, if Sievers's assumptions about resolution are correct, as the evidence of Kaluza's law shows, then at least the larger framework of his analysis of alliterative meters, if not all its details, must also be correct. The reason for this is the peculiar role that resolution plays within that framework. Sievers's system of analysis is popularly known as a set of five templates, or "types":

- (7) A: PxPx
 wundum dryhtne (2753b); geong in gearдум (13a)
 B: xPxP
 on flēam gewand (1001b); þæt mihtig God (701a)
 C: xPPx
 gefēan habban (2740b); mid scipherge (243a)
 D: PPSx
 wīs wēlpungen (1927a); fēond mancynnes (164b)
 E: PSxP
 glēomannes gyd (1160a); gūðrinc astāh (1118b)

It is not true, as it is sometimes assumed, that the selection of types is arbitrary—that one could alter the structure of one or more of the five types and the system of analysis would remain equally viable.⁷ In

⁷ For example, Hutcheson (1995) generally retains Sievers's five types but adds some to the list, while Cygan (1968:154) rearranges the types and adds a new one. The assumption also underlies a great many arguments, for example that of Daunt (1946) that the five types are simply the commonest prosodic patterns in

actuality, the five types are mid-level abstractions, manifestations of the more fundamental principle that each verse must contain four metrical positions.⁸ Cable (1974) has shown that given the assumption of four metrical positions per verse and three levels of stress—primary, secondary, and non-stress—there are eight logically possible verse contours.⁹ The point is illustrated in figure 1 (based on Cable 1974:94–96), where, for the sake of clarity, pitch has been substituted for relative stress. If the further condition is imposed that the second of two

the language (as if no other factor governed Sievers's selection of them), and Bliss's acceptance of three-position verses (see above).

⁸ A position (Ger. *Glied*) as Sievers understands it (1893:§8) is not an arbitrarily chosen set of syllables but an entity that is closely constrained: if it is stressed, it must be one of the two stressed entities in his system, and nothing more: a lift (under primary stress, i.e., a heavy syllable or a resolved sequence) or a half-lift (under secondary stress). If it is unstressed it may comprise more than one syllable, but it must comprise all adjacent unstressed syllables, not an arbitrarily selected subset.

⁹ In actuality, it may not be necessary to assign more than two levels of stress lexically, since secondary stress may be accounted for simply as a positional variant of primary stress. That is, two levels of lexical stress would yield four levels of phrasal stress in verse, as in type D. Whether the assumption of two levels of lexical stress is viable depends on whether tertiary stress (in non-compounds like dat. *wīsdōme*) is lexically or positionally defined (see Fulk 1992:§§184–214). A referee for *JGL* unpersuaded by Cable's analysis objected that the interaction of constraints described here would produce the un-Sieverian types SxSP, PxPP, and PxSP. In fact, the first and last are ruled out by the stipulation that the second of two adjacent stresses must be subordinated. As a consequence, secondary stress occurs only after a full lift, and so initial S and the sequence xS are impossible. The sequence PP, to be sure, does not occur verse-finally in metrically conservative poems like *Beowulf*, though it is found in some late poems (see Fulk 1992:§291), and so it is true that a separate provision must be added to account for this restriction. The contour of this would be realized as Px in the Sieversian notation employed above. For the same reason, PSPS in Sievers's system is not regarded as fundamentally different from PxPx—both are variants of type A, though Sievers provides the distinguishing subtype labels A2ab and A1, respectively—because the five templates represent relative rather than absolute stress values. In accordance with Sievers's assumptions, then, figure 1 expresses contours defined relationally rather than absolute levels of stress.

adjacent stresses must be subordinated, then just five of those eight verse contours are allowed—corresponding to the five types illustrated in 7.

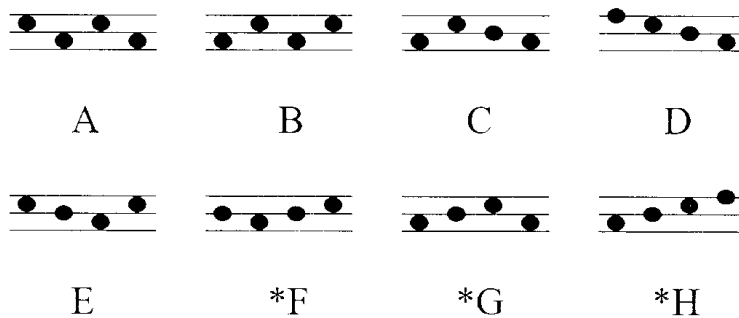


Figure 1. Eight logically possible alliterative verse contours.

To be sure, there are one or two verse types left out of this scheme, requiring separate explanation.¹⁰ Still, the problems with this analysis are small in comparison to the enormous explanatory power it brings to the analysis of early Germanic meters. In any case, the larger point is not whether Sievers's system adequately accounts for this or that verse type, but what the underlying rationale of that system is. The five types are not arbitrarily chosen: none of the five templates could be altered without altering the fundamentals of the system, since the five types are merely mid-level manifestations of more fundamental principles, particularly the requirement of four positions per verse. The significance of this in the present context is the role that resolution plays in enabling this system to function. Without resolution we would find a great many verses that comprise more than four metrical positions, and if resolution were not variable under secondary stress, a great many verses that comprise fewer than four positions would result:

¹⁰ The types are D* (e.g., *licgan līfbysig* 966a), which would appear to occupy five positions, and light verses (e.g. *sōna him se frōda* 2928), which would appear to occupy fewer than four. The latter type is not exceptional under Sievers's analysis, since Sievers would stress *sōna*; and so would Cable (1974:20–31), who explains type D* as merely the surface manifestation of an underlying pattern of four positions (75–83). For certain qualifications to the analysis represented in figure 1, see Cable 1991:39.

- (8) a. Assuming no resolution:
 mundgripe mægenes (1534a) = 6 positions
 hæleða monegum (3111b) = 6 positions
 b. Assuming invariable resolution:
 gōd gūðcyning (1563a) = 3 positions
 on stefn stigon (212a) = 3 positions

The purpose of resolution in Sievers's system is thus clear: it is a policing action that functions only to regulate the number of positions per verse (Obst 1987a:464). To argue that there is no such principle as resolution at work, or that it does not apply variably, is not to tinker with the details of Sievers's analysis but to reject outright its fundamental premise of four metrical positions. Accordingly, evidence that there really is a principle of resolution at work in verse—evidence such as the distribution of long and short endings under Kaluza's law—lends strong support to the accuracy of Sievers's analysis, since resolution is motivated only by the need to preserve the four-position principle.

There is nothing unnatural about resolution as a metrical principle. There is a principle of equivalence between two light syllables and one heavy in the thesis of Greek and Latin meters, since in a variety of meters a spondee (heavy-heavy) may substitute for a dactyl (heavy-light-light) at many places in the verse, or a tribrach (light-light-light) may be the equivalent of a trochee (heavy-light) or an iambus (light-heavy) (Goodwin 1894: §§1626–1636). More significantly, it has been pointed out (first by Kuryłowicz 1948/1949, though it is worked out most elegantly by Drescher and Lahiri 1991) that resolution need not be regarded as simply a metrical principle but as a consequence of an early Germanic phonotactic constraint. In the early Germanic languages no monosyllable might end in a short stressed vowel—a restriction referred to as “minimal word.” This explains the lengthening in a word like OE *swā* ‘so’. The etymon *swæ* (also attested) lost length when it was unstressed, and when the resulting unstressed form *swa* (with *a* because *æ* did not occur at that time in unstressed positions) was extended to stressed positions, the new vowel was lengthened. Resolution thus may be analyzed as an expression of this restriction in a more general form: resolution can be said to occur to remove the anomaly of a stressed syllable ending in a short vowel, a violation of the principle known as Prokosch's law, the preference for bimoraic stressed syllables in Germanic. Thus, too, it makes sense that resolution should not apply to

unstressed syllables (where there is no prohibition against short vowels in open syllables), and variably to those bearing secondary stress.

Other evidence for the existence of resolution in Germanic may be derived from Icelandic *rímur*. Introduced in the fourteenth century, these are composed in ballad meters—nonalliterative, rhyming verse forms based on the alternation of stressed syllables at regular intervals, like the usual meters encountered in the Germanic languages since the later Middle Ages. Since they resemble contemporary Germanic meters, in regard to them there can be very little disagreement about stress placement and syllable count, as there is in regard to alliterative meters. It is therefore significant that in some of the earliest examples of these ballad meters the principle of resolution has been carried over from the older alliterative meters, and it shows up very clearly against the backdrop of footed verses. The earliest *ríma* preserved is *Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar*, by Einar Gilsson (ca. 1350), excerpted here:¹¹

(9) a. Ólafr kóngur ǫrr ok fríðr
 átti Noregi at ráða;
 gramr var æ við bragna blíðr
 borinn til sigrs ok náða.
 ‘King Ólafr, generous and handsome,
 was destined to rule Norway;
 that king was always kind to heroes,
 born to war and peace.’ (stanza 1)

b. Hárekr var fyrir brognum bystr
 búinn at stríða stilli;
 Þórir hundr er þann veg lustr
 þriði var Kálfr inn illi.
 ‘Hárekr was rude above all poets,
 ready to attack a king;
 Þórir the Dog was inclined that way;
 a third was Kálfr the Stingy.’ (stanza 8)

The meter is the same as that of the English carol “Good King Wenceslas,” and normally there is elision between final and initial

¹¹ Cf. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger 1860–1868:2.8–11, at 7. The spelling has been normalized.

vowels.¹² A light syllable under full stress requires the support of another syllable, as in the word *borinn* in 9a. *Noregi* in the second line is probably another example, but the root vowel is etymologically long, and just possibly it had not yet been shortened in the fourteenth century.¹³ In 9b there is resolution in the word *búinn*, since an antevocalic long vowel is metrically short in Icelandic alliterative meters; and *þriði* in the fourth line is an unambiguous example.¹⁴ The same treatment of light stressed syllables is evident in *Skíða ríma* (authorship disputed; ca. 1470?), in a nearly identical meter:¹⁵

- (10) a. Látum heldur leika tenn
 á litlum ævintýrum;
 þá munu *geta* vór góðir menn
 hjá gull-hlaðs skorðum dýrum.
 ‘Rather, let’s sink our teeth
 into some little adventures;
 then surely good people will speak of us
 among the precious supports of gold lace (i.e., women).’
 (stanza 5)

¹² One of two anonymous readers, an opponent of Sievers’s analysis of Old English meter and a proponent of Golston and Riad’s purely quantitative one, found this “easy reference to elision” unsatisfactory, apparently regarding elision as a suspicious principle. Rather than mount a digressive quantitative demonstration of the role of elision in Icelandic *rímur*, I shall appeal to the parallel of coeval Western European poetic traditions: see, for instance, the example of Chaucerian verse, discussed below, in regard to which Middle English scholars are in agreement that elision is a standard metrical device. This response may not be wholly adequate, but since elision is accepted by Norse metrists as a standard feature of Icelandic isometric verse and is practiced by Icelanders to this day in the performance of contemporary *rímur*, skepticism about it seems to me unwarranted.

¹³ This corrects the analysis of this stanza in Fulk 1996a:506.

¹⁴ Note that *fyrir* in 9b is not technically resolved, since it is unstressed. Extra syllables in unstressed positions in alliterative Icelandic meters are also the norm.

¹⁵ Cf. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Powell 1883:2.398–405, at 399. The spelling has been standardized.

- b. Fjølmiss átti-ek fornan bát
 sem flaut í óðar ranni;
 þar var *skrifuð* á skemtun kát
 af Skíða göngu-manni.
 ‘I had Fjöltnir’s ancient boat,
 which floated in the hall of song;
 therein was written a merry entertainment
 about Skíði the tramp.’ (stanza 6)

It hardly matters whether or not vowels had been lengthened in open syllables in Icelandic by this time: even if the poets are merely mimicking the conventions of older verse, this seems to be unambiguous evidence that they perceived resolution as a property of that older verse.

There is more direct, if somewhat vaguer, Icelandic evidence for resolution in Snorri Sturluson’s description of verse construction in his *Háttatal* (ca. 1221). He indicates that syllable length is a factor relevant to skaldic verse construction when he says, “Sound is distinguished by having syllables long or short.”¹⁶ He seems to be referring in part to resolution later when he says, “Now we shall demonstrate syllables that are so quick and placed so close to each other, that as a result the length of the line is increased.”¹⁷ But the verses he cites as examples involve both resolution and elision, so his meaning is not unambiguous. For example, in two of the verses he quotes, *bila muna gramr þó at gumna / gular rítr nái líta* ‘The king will not give way though he gets to see men’s yellow shields’, there is resolution in *bila* and *gular*, there is elision in *þó at*, and there is “neutralization” (a term reserved for non-lifts: Árnason 1991:33–34, 47; Gade 1995:61 *et passim*) of *muna*. Still, the general principle he seems to be demonstrating, that when syllables are “quick” and “placed close to each other” there may be more of them in the verse, accords with modern metrists’ assumption of resolution. More apposite, he clearly implies that six is the normal number of syllables per verse in *dróttkvætt* meters (since he illustrates *seinar* ‘slow’ syllables with verses of five syllables and *skjótar* ‘quick’ ones with verses of seven or eight, and he refers explicitly to the numerical

¹⁶ “Hljóð greinir þat at hafa samstöfur langar eða skammar” (edited and translated Faulkes 1991:3, 1987:165).

¹⁷ “Nú skal sýna svá skjótar samstöfur ok svá settar nær hverja annari at af því eykr lengð orðsins” (Faulkes 1991:7; 1987:171).

disparities), and the words *bila* and *gular* in the verses above must therefore be intended as part of his demonstration of “quick” syllables.

There is some evidence similar to that of the Icelandic *rímur* for the reality of resolution in Old English verse. It is attested in an early Middle English poem with a regular isometric, rhyming nonalliterative form introduced after the Norman Conquest. The text is *Poema morale*, or *A Moral Ode*, probably composed a hundred years or fewer after the Conquest. It was apparently a popular work, since it is preserved in seven copies in six different manuscripts. The length varies from manuscript to manuscript, but it is generally about 400 lines long. None of the extant manuscript texts is very close to the original, and they show a great deal of textual disagreement in such small matters as might disrupt the meter. The verses cited below are drawn from the critical edition of Marcus (1934), based on one of the two earliest manuscripts, Bodleian 1605, also known as Digby A 4, dated to about 1200.

The meter is probably the earliest English example of the septenarius, a rhythm made unforgettable by its unendurably monotonous use in the near-contemporary *Ormulum*. The meter is like that of the *rímur* cited above, with prolongation of the final foot to compensate for the fact that the second hemistich contains three rather than four feet. For that reason, just as in the *Ormulum*, an etymologically heavy syllable is required in the penult of the line (see Fulk 1996a:487–489). The meter is based on Latin models, of which 11 is a representative example.¹⁸

- (11) Fortúne róta vólvitúr: | descéndo mínorátus;
altér in áltum tóllitúr; | nímis éxaltátus
réx sedét in vérticé— | cáveát ruínam!
nám sub áxe léгимús | Hé cubám regínam.

‘The wheel of Fortune turns: threatened, I descend; another is carried on high. Vastly exalted, a king sits at the very top—let him beware of ruin! For we under the heavens have chosen Hecuba queen.’

The first foot may or may not have an extra, anacrustic unstressed syllable prefixed to it, and level stress is common, for example in *alter* and *sedet*, which bore initial lexical stress in Classical and Medieval Latin. There is usually a strong caesura between the hemistichs, as in

¹⁸ *Carmina Burana* 16.3, Hilka and Schumann (1930:1.1.34).

lines 2–4, although the second hemistich may also begin with an unstressed syllable, as in line 1. These metrical features are also to be found in *Poema morale*, nearly all of them in the first four lines, as in 12.

- (12) Íc am élder þánne ic wés | a wíntre ánd a lóre.
 Ic wélde móre þánne ic déde; | mi wít oh tó bi móre.
 Wel lóngę ic hábbe chíld ibíen | on wórde ánd on déde;
 Þégh ic bí on wíntren éald | to zióung ic ám on réde.
 ‘I am older than I was in years and in learning. I have more control than I did; my understanding ought to be greater. Quite long I have been a child in word and deed; though I am old in years, I am too young in wisdom.’

In addition, in *Poema morale* there is frequent elision of final unstressed vowels before vocalic initials, as in the Icelandic *rímur* above, and sometimes even before consonantal initials. Elision, however, is not required without exception in all such contexts. Elided vowels are underdotted in the examples below. Elision often takes place before initial *h*, as well, as in Chaucer (see Minkova and Stockwell 1996). In trisyllabic words the middle syllable is very often syncopated, as with *makede*, *fuzeles*, and *betere* in 13, where a metrically syncopated vowel is also underdotted:

- (13) He mákeðe físses ín þer sáe | and fózęles ón þar léfte (83)
 ‘He made fishes in the sea and birds in the air.’
 Bétéreę is wóri wéter drínk | þanne átter imáingd mid wíne (144)
 ‘It is better to drink dirty water than poison mixed with wine.’

Indeed, there is much fluctuation in the representation of such middle vowels already in late Old English (Campbell 1959: §§389, 574[3]). In the second hemistich of line 144 in 13 there is an example of syneresis—that is, nonsyllabic treatment of a word-final combination of vowel plus approximant (perhaps representing a syllabic consonant that is desyllabified) before a vocalic initial. Syneresis is common, as in the words *comen*, *muchel*, and *litel* in 14.

- (14) Hé sal cómen on éuęle stéde | búte God hím bi mílde (26)
 ‘He shall come into an evil place unless God is kind to him.’
 Ál to múchęl ic hábbe ispént, | to lítęl iléid on hórde (28)
 ‘Far too much have I spent, and laid up too little in hoard.’

These conventions are common to most Middle English isometric verse. They are all attested, for example, in the opening lines of *The Knight's Tale* (ca. 1387) in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (Benson 1987:37):

- (15) Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
 Ther was a duc that highte Theseus; (860)
 Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
 And in his tyme swich a conquerour
 That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.
 Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne;
 What with his wysdom and his chivalrie, (865)
 He conquered al the regne of Femenye,
 That whilom was ycleped Scithia,
 And weddede the queene Ypolita,
 And broghte hir hoom with hym in his contree
 With muchel glorie and greet solempnytee, (870)
 And eek hir yonge suster Emelye.
 And thus with victorie and with melodye
 Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ryde,
 And al his hoost in armes hym bisyde.

Here we see examples of elision both before vocalic initials (*regne of* 866, *queene Ypolita* 868, *Lete I* 873) and before *h* (*hadde he* 864, *broghte hir* 869), metrical syncope in trisyllabic words (*Atthenes* 861, 873, *conquered* 866, perhaps *victorie* 872), and syneresis (*many a* 864, *glorie and* 870, perhaps *victorie and* 872). Once these metrical conventions are applied, the meter of both passages, from *The Knight's Tale* and *Poema morale*, prove quite a bit more regular than they might initially seem.

There remains one irregularity, though, which these conventions do not account for. In 12 above, the meter is a perfectly regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables with the sole exception of line 2, where at the end of the first hemistich the second syllable of *dede* joins with the following unstressed word to form a weak position of two syllables. This irregularity was first pointed out by Schipper (1910:193). About line 2 and others like it he remarks that a “noteworthy indication of want of skill in the handling of the Septenary in this first attempt is the frequent occurrence of a superfluous syllable at the close of the first hemistich.” Elsewhere (1881:96–97) Schipper offers various explanations for disyllabic words at the end of the first hemistich, including “Verschleifung.” Marcus (1934:29–30) also analyzes this

phenomenon as “Verschleifung,” comparing it to the much later treatment of words like *heavenly*, *withereth*, and *gathering* with an elided syllable in Early Modern drama. Marcus groups this metrical treatment with similar instances of “Verschleifung” in the middle of each hemistich (though he offers no examples), and he thus obscures the really salient observation that Schipper had made: it is only at the end of the first hemistich that the disruption is difficult to account for by ordinary means. The reason is that verse-internal instances like those in 14 usually appear before vocalic initials. It is only in final position in the first hemistich that, with any great frequency, analogous instances are to be found in which the extra syllable appears before a consonantal initial, producing an inalterable sequence of two unstressed syllables. There are 20 unambiguous verses of this kind in the first hundred lines of *Poema morale*, collected in 16, where the relevant word at the end of the first hemistich is italicized. In each instance the final syllable of the italicized word disrupts the meter, creating a thesis of two unstressed syllables.

- (16) Ic welde more þanne ic *dede*; | mi wit oh to bi more (2)
 Do ech to gode þet hi *muze*, | þer wile hi bieð a liue (23)
 Ne [lipnie] no man to *muchel* | to childe ne to wiue (24)
 Ne hopie wif to hire *were*, | ne were to his wiue (31)
 Vor sone willeð hine *uorziete* | þo fremde and þo sibbe (34)
 Se deð his eȝthe on sikere *stede* | þet sent hi to heueriche (42)
 Þer ne mai hit him *binimen* | se loþe ne se lieue (44)
 Þider we sendeð and selue *bereð* | to litel and to selde (46)
 For þer ne mai hit us *binime* | ne king ne his serreue (50)
 zieue hi for godes *loue*, | þanne deð he hi wel ihialde (56)
 Euel we doð al to *muchel*, | god lesse þanne we solde (60)
 Aider to litel and to *muchel* | sal þenchen eft hem boðe (62)
 Þer me sal ure werkes *weze* | biuore þe heuenekinge (63)
 Þet is si wonderlicheste *ware* | þet ani man eure vonde (68)
 Alle his workes and his *wezes* | is milce and rihtwisnesse (72)
 Nis him ec no þing *uorhole*, | swo muchel bieð his mihte (77)
 He is buuen us and *bineþen*, | biuoren and bihinde (87)
 We þet godes hesne *brekeð* | and gelteð swo ilome (91)
 We þet neure god ne *dede* | þan heuenliche deme (96)
 Þer sulle deoflen bi swo *uele* | þet willeð keðen þere (97)

What is remarkable about these verses is that in every one of them the last stressed syllable in the hemistich is light, suggesting a connection with the alliterative principle of resolution.¹⁹

This group of verses does not include some that might have been thought to belong to this category. The verse in 17 has a short-stemmed verb in the relevant position, with a third person singular present ending. There are a few instances in the poem in which the meter seems to indicate that this ending requires syncope, and a few in which it is actually written syncopated. Syncope in this verb inflection is the norm in the West Saxon and Kentish dialects of Old English. This metrical treatment is by no means an absolute rule in the poem—it is in fact far more frequently forbidden by the meter than demanded by it—but it does leave it ambiguous in verses like 17 whether the disyllabic verb forms are authorial.²⁰

(17) Eurich man mid þet he *haueð* | mai beggen heueriche (65)

The verses in 18 are like those in 16, except that the second hemistich begins with an unstressed vowel, and thus there is the possibility that elision over the hemistich boundary is intended. This is the convention that is required in one unambiguous instance in the first hundred lines, line 57, which is the last line cited in 18. So these verses are ambiguous.

¹⁹ This explains why the extra syllable cannot plausibly be explained as modeled on the “epic caesura” of Romance hendecasyllabics, allowing an extra syllable after the midline caesura (see Stockwell and Minkova 2001): that the preceding syllable is always short would then be an extraordinary coincidence. In any case, such an extra syllable is not modeled in any of the Latin verse on which the meter of *Poema morale* is based. Note that in 63 and 72, *weze(s)* ought to show diphthongization already in early Middle English, before the onset of open syllable lengthening, and thus it could not be said to have a light first syllable. But etymologically the syllable is light, and it is assumed here that diphthongization at least before vowels had not yet occurred at the time of composition. This is what is suggested by the regularity with which the penultimate syllable in the relevant verses in other cases is light.

²⁰ This reasoning does not apply to line 91 in 16, where *brekeð* is plural. That the poem contains unsyncopated forms should not be taken as evidence that it is not a Kentish or Southern composition. To the contrary, though much earlier, King Alfred’s poems, and others from the South, mix native West Saxon syncopated forms with the unsyncopated ones of the poetic *koine* (see Sievers 1885).

- (18) Þer ne darf he habben *kare* | of zïeue ne of zïelde (45)
 Ac þet we doð for godes *loue*, | eft we sollen hit al vinde (58)
 Nabbeð he no þing *vorzete* | of þan þet hi isezen (98)
 Cf.: Vre iswinch and ure *itilðe* | is ofte iwoned to aswinde (57)

Then in 19 are collected all the instances, in the first hundred lines, of verses that resemble those in 16, except that the second hemistich is catalectic, and thus it may be that the final unstressed syllable of the first hemistich is intended to fill the empty unstressed initial position of the second. These verses, too, are thus ambiguous.

- (19) Vele idel word ic habbe *iqueðe*, | siþen ic speke cuðe (9)
 Þet wel ne doð þer wile hi *muze*, | ofte hit ham sel riewe (21)
 He sal cumen on euele *stede*, | bute god him bi milde (26)
 For betere is on elmesse *biuore* | þanne ben efter seuene (28)
 For þer ne sal me us naht *binimen* | mid wrangwise dome (48)
 Þider we solden alle *drazhen*, | wolde ze me ileuen (49)
 Al swo wel swo se þet *haueð* | goldes vele monke (70)
 And eðlete muchel *izeue* | þanne si hierte is ille (74)
 He one is eure on eche *stede*, | wende þer þu wende (86)

Yet even if these verses in 17–19 are ambiguous, combined with the verses in 16 they demonstrate a remarkable distribution. It should be apparent from these lists that of the first hundred lines of the poem, more than a third have a short syllable in the penult of the first hemistich. The frequency with which this pattern appears is out of proportion to the incidence of stressed disyllables with a short first syllable in other positions. In the first hundred lines there are 37 other examples in the first hemistich—that is, in positions other than finality.²¹ One might expect nearly three times that many, given that there are 33 at the end of the first hemistich and there are four feet in this half of the line. Or to put it another way, since there are just 37 examples in positions other than finality, we might have expected no more than 12 in finality, rather than the 33 that actually occur. Moreover, only a very small number of these demand scansion with elision or syneresis; the vast majority must be scanned as two syllables, making the metrical treatment of comparable

²¹ Included in this count, naturally, are trisyllables with an unstressed first syllable (like *biuoren* ‘before’ 27), and the first element of the compound *heuenfer* ‘heavenly fire (i.e., stars)’ (76).

words at the end of the first hemistich even more anomalous. The distribution of such words thus is not random. Clearly disyllables of this sort are privileged at the end of the first hemistich.

In contrast to the 20 unambiguous examples in 16, in the first hundred lines of the poem there is not a single instance of a corresponding verse with an etymologically heavy syllable in the relevant position. This is not to say that there are no exceptions in the poem at all. Indeed, the pattern described above turns out to be clearer, and the examples more numerous, in the first hundred lines than in the last three hundred; but the pattern is nonetheless observable throughout the poem. It is only in the last three hundred lines that examples in which there is a heavy syllable in the relevant position do occur. All the unambiguous examples are listed in 20.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| (20) Þet he ne muze þanne bidde <i>ore</i> , vor þet itit ilome | (125) |
| Swo mai of pine þet not wat is <i>pine</i> þet eure mo sel leste | (148) |
| Ic wille nu come to þon <i>dome</i> þet ic zeu of er sede | (157) |
| Nolde hit moze do vor <i>meie</i> ne suster vor broþer | (187) |
| And on þos loþes diefle <i>werkes</i> to bleðeliche swunke | (256) |
| And alle þo þet anie <i>wise</i> þo diefle er ikuemde | (271) |
| Þo beð nu mid him in <i>helle</i> vordon and vordemde | (272) |

The number is obviously small in comparison to the very high incidence of light syllables in this position. Some of these verses are in fact debatable examples. In 187 most manuscripts lack the *e* on the end of *meie* ‘kin’. In 256 the ending on *werkes* ‘works’ is unetymological, since this is a neuter noun in Old English, where it is uninflected in the plural. In this case it is just one manuscript that has the *-es* inflection; all the rest have *-e* or leave the noun uninflected. In 157, *of* in the second hemistich is missing in some manuscripts, and this alters the rhythm entirely.

These counterexamples are not to be ignored, but their evidence is not of sufficient weight to vitiate the larger generalization that can be drawn. That is, the pattern of two short syllables counting as a single arsis, illustrated in 16, is restricted to the end of the first hemistich. It should not be surprising that the pattern is restricted to this position, since it has often been remarked that in the Indo-European languages the end of the verse is generally more highly structured than the rest (see, for example, Lotz 1972:5 and Hayes 1983:373); and the resolved pattern should not be expected at the end of the second hemistich (rather than the first), where a long syllable is required in the penult for the sake of

prolonging the final foot.²² Such treatment of light syllables as is found at the end of the first hemistich in *Poema morale* seems to have no correlate anywhere in Middle English verse, since Minkova (1997:443–444) has shown that claims for resolution in other early Middle English verse cannot be substantiated. Neither is there any correlate in French and Latin models, but only in Old English alliterative meters. It would seem, then, that what we are seeing is the survival of a property from earlier native verse, allowing resolution of a short syllable plus another.²³

Might this metrical device be a Middle English innovation rather than a reflex of Old English resolution?²⁴ Naturally it is impossible to

²² Geoffrey Russom has observed to me that resolution is required under primary stress in Old English verse because alliteration as an organizing principle is “left-handed,” and resolution is permitted only at the end of the hemistich in *Poema morale* because rhyme is “right-handed”; see Russom 1987:115.

²³ One of the two anonymous readers objected that resolution in *Poema morale* is different from resolution in Old English, since the former shows resolution only of two short syllables (LL=H), while in the latter, a short syllable (under primary stress only, I should stipulate for *Beowulf*) may be resolved with a syllable of any length (LX=H). In actuality, we may say that in *Poema morale*, too, a short syllable may resolve with a syllable of any length, as the words *muchel* (60, 62), *wezes* (72), and *bineþen* (87) are resolved. In Old English the final syllables of such words count as heavy for the purpose of Kaluza’s law, just as the word-final sequence -VC is heavy under primary stress, sufficing for the coda of a lift. As for words comprising a light stressed syllable followed by a final syllable ending in two consonants, it is impossible to tell whether these would or would not resolve in *Poema morale*, since there is just one such form in the poem, *coning* ‘coney’ < Old French *conin*, in line 363. As there is just one example, it is not surprising that no such word occurs in the relevant position at the end of the first hemistich. The dearth of such forms is in part explained by changes affecting many words of this type during the transition from Old to Middle English, e.g., *cyning*, *weoruld* > *cyng*, *werld* (see lines 322, 332), beginning in inflected forms. But the dearth seems more remarkable than it actually is because of comparative considerations: Old English resolution is commoner because inflected forms like *cyninges* and *weorulda* may show resolution in Old English, while only disyllables (disregarding words like *bineþen*) are affected in *Poema morale*, due to the positional restriction of resolution to the end of the first hemistich.

²⁴ This explanation was proposed by both anonymous readers. In truth, it would not have occurred to me. One referee objects, “Assume you find rhyme in

prove that it is not, just as it is impossible to prove that, for example, the monosyllabic treatment of words like *heaven*, *stolen*, and *ever* in English verse as late as the nineteenth century is not a Victorian novelty rather than an inheritance from sixteenth-century verse. Yet in both cases the assumption of independent innovation raises problems of probability. If resolution in *Poema morale* were a Middle English creation it would have to be assumed to be this one poet's invention, since it is not known for certain to appear in any other Middle English verse, nor in any of the septenary Latin compositions on which the poem's meter is modeled. If the poet did invent it, it would presumably be on the basis of the morpho-phonological structure of early Middle English (especially in concert with Prokosch's law), which must have retained more or less exactly the structure of late Old English until the onset of Open Syllable Lengthening shortly after the time the poem was composed. Yet if the structure of early Middle English for about a century after the Conquest should have produced such a prosodic device, it would not seem very reasonable to insist in the face of the considerable counterevidence that there was no similar device at work in all the five literate centuries of Old English before this, even though the same relevant morpho-phonological conditions obtained. Any argument based on the assumption that resolution in *Poema morale* is entirely the poet's innovation must face the charge of ignoring coincidence: on entirely independent grounds resolution was first posited as an Old English

Middle English. That doesn't say anything about rhyme in Old English." The point seems to be that the use of rhyme in Middle English does not entail the expectation that rhyme should have been normal in Old English verse. But the comparison is inapt, for more than one reason. It is on the basis primarily of Old English evidence that resolution is posited in the first place: without the Old English evidence, the phenomenon in *Poema morale* would indeed not be much more remarkable than rhyme, and so to find it here only after its existence has been posited on the basis of Old English evidence is striking. By contrast, finding rhyme in Middle English verse has nothing to do with prior evidence from Old English: rhyme does occur in some Old English poems (most unambiguously in *The Riming Poem* and in Cynewulf's *Elene* 1236–1251 and *Christ II* 586–598: see Fulk 1992:§389), but the connection with Middle English rhyme need not be regarded as genetic, since the very isometric verse forms of Middle English are borrowed from the rhyming traditions of French and Latin verse. There is no model in French and Latin verse, on the other hand, for the phenomenon of resolution in *Poema morale*.

prosodic device, and so to find a similar metrical device attested in early Middle English and to treat that discovery as bearing no relation to the earlier hypothesis is to strain credibility. Since there is evidence for resolution in Old English, positing a separate origin in early Middle English is a violation of Occam's razor, which forbids the unnecessary multiplication of explanatory factors: it is logically simplest to explain the Old and Middle English evidence by the same means. The prosody of *Poema morale* thus reinforces the mass of evidence for the actuality of resolution in Old English verse.

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