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## RHYMES IN THE EPILOGUE TO *ELENE*: A RECONSIDERATION

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One of the more confident conclusions of Anglo-Saxon scholarship is that the rhyming passage at the beginning of the Epilogue to Cynewulf's *Elene* shows clear signs of having been written in an Anglian dialect, probably Mercian. Hence Cynewulf, the only known Old English poet to whom a substantial body of surviving verse may be reliably attributed, must have been an Anglian.

The implications do not stop there. Two of Cynewulf's signed poems, *Elene* and *The Fates of the Apostles*, are in the Vercelli Book; two, *Juliana* and *The Ascension (Christ II)*, are in the Exeter Book. These codices are of southern origin, and that they should contain all the extant work of the supposedly Anglian Cynewulf both satisfies and encourages the assumption "that the history of the earlier poetry is simply one of composition in Anglian with a one-way transmission ending in the Late West Saxon manuscripts": "which," as Dr. Sisam points out, "is really the thing to be proved."<sup>1</sup>

Of course the Epilogue to *Elene* is not the only source of arguments in favour of Cynewulf's Anglian origin, but nothing is so apparently decisive as the argument Eduard Sievers put nearly 90 years ago, in one sentence in a footnote:

Ebenso ist in der längeren reimstelle *Elene* 1237ff. [in modern editions 1236ff.] statt des überlieferten *riht: geþeagt* 1241, *miht: þeagt* 1242, *āmæt: begeat* 1248 in anglischer form *reht: geþæht, mæht: þæht, āmæt: beget* zu setzen (1244 ist ausserdem statt des überlieferten späten *onwreāh: fāh* natürlich das ältere *onwrah* herzustellen).

Dr Sisam, in his important paper on "Cynewulf and his Poetry," used the same argument. Recent editors of Cynewulf's poetry have followed suit.<sup>2</sup>

For convenience the first 15 lines of the Epilogue are printed below. In the main, the text is that of Professor Whitelock as printed in her 15th edition of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, but I have incorporated the MS readings into the body of the text, indicating editorial omissions in round brackets, additions in square. An oblique stroke indicates the lineation of the MS.

R	þus ic frōd ond fūs	þurh þæt fācne hūs	1236
A	wordcræft[um] wæf	ond wundrum / læs,	
R	þrāgum þreodude	ond geþanc reodode	
R	nihtes nearwe. /	Nyssa ic gearwe	
C	be þære [rōde] riht	ær me rūmran geþeagt	
C	þurh ðā / mæran miht	on mōdes (þ)eaht	
C	wisdōm onwreāh.	Ic wæs weorcum / fāh,	

R	synnum āsæled,	sorgum gewæled,	
A	bitrum gebunden,	beisgum be / þrunge,	
A	ær mē lāre onlāg,	þurh lēohtne hād,	10
-	gamelum tō gēoce,	gife / unscynde	
C	Mægencyning āmæt,	oñd on gemynd begeat,	
A	torht on / tynde,	tīdum gerýmde,	
R	bāncofan onband,	brēostlōcan onwand, /	
R	lēoð(u)cræft onlēac,	þæs ic lustum brēac,	15
	willum in worlde.		

The letter R, A, and C to the left of each line stand respectively for Rhyme, Assonance, and Consonance. *Rhyme* is full rhyme, *fūs: hūs*, the words being at the end of each half-line; *assonance* denotes the correspondence of vowels in these words but a difference of consonant, *wæf: les*; *consonance* I use to describe correspondence of consonant but difference of vowel, as in MS *riht: geþeht*. Obviously assonance and consonance together give full rhyme.

Classifying the lines as I have done above on the basis of the MS readings, six of the 15 lines have full rhyme (I include *preodude: reodode* 3 here); four have assonance; four have consonance; and one, line 11, has none of these features.

The line of reasoning followed by Sievers would be wholly convincing if, in Sisam's phrase, we indeed had "fifteen lines of the regular type"<sup>3</sup> of the first line, that is, with full rhyme; and if, after the substitution of Anglian forms, this regularity was complete. But it cannot be. Whatever forms are substituted, and even if it is admitted that *gebunden: beþrunge* 9 and *ontynde: gerýmde* 13 are practically full rhymes, lines 2 and 10 remain as examples of assonance. Since rhyme implies assonance, whereas assonance does not imply full rhyme, the argument—to be consistent—must rather be that the substitution of Anglian forms gives a complete pattern of assonance throughout the passage.

The practical alternatives, then, seem to be these: *either* a pattern of assonance was intended, and this may be retrieved by substituting Anglian forms for the forms of the MS; *or* the passage contains a variety of ornamental features arranged in too irregular a way for any conclusions about Anglian or other dialectal origin to be safely drawn from these features alone.

Let us examine the former possibility first. Sievers achieved an almost complete pattern of assonance by substituting *onwrāh* for *onurēah* 7a (the substitution is not necessarily Anglian) and by supposing *mæht: þæht* 6. The initial *þ* in *þæht* looks like an afterthought in the MS, but whether one preserves the MS *þæht* or reads *eaht* makes no difference to the point at issue here; Anglian *þæht* or *eaht* still gives the required assonance with Anglian *mæht* 6b.<sup>4</sup> The form *eaht* actually occurs in *Elene* 473b; it is perhaps worthy of remark that *unrihtes* occurs in the previous line, 472a, and *geþehte* a few lines before that, 468a.

Sievers' substitution of *reht: geþæht* 5, however, does not achieve the required assonance; and if the consonance here is sufficient no grounds for postulating Anglian forms in the first place remain: we have consonance already in the MS forms *riht: geþeht*, *miht: (þ)eaht*, *onwrēah: fāh*. It cannot well be objected to this that the difference between Sievers' *reht* and *geþæht* is

too small to be significant; Sievers himself depended upon such small differences.

Miss Gradon, in her edition of *Elene*, prefers the forms *reht*: *geþeht*, *meht*: *þeht*, characterizing these as West Mercian. (I rule out the possibility of \**reht*, which Miss Gradon says "could be only Northumbrian," as too unlikely. Variation between *cneht* and *cneht* is found in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and *Rushworth Gospels* glosses, but in words other than this the alternation is sporadic, and \**reht* seems not to occur.) But if Miss Gradon has gained consistency in the pattern of assonance (and rhyme) by these *-eht* forms, the loss is heavy, for such forms with *-e-* are not uniquely Anglian; such forms are also found in ninth-century West Saxon and Kentish. Miss Gradon observes of these forms that, "smoothing of *ea* to *e* . . . is common in late WS but such an origin is impossible here." On the contrary, smoothed forms are found in early West Saxon, and in Kentish palatal umlaut *ea* > *i* seems to have gone through the intermediate stage *e* (*rehtlicast* "most right," *sex* "six").<sup>5</sup> I am not putting forward the hypothesis that Cynewulf wrote in Canterbury, many though the attractions of it are, but merely observing that the substitution of *-eht* forms in the Epilogue to *Elene* would be consistent with Kentish provenance no less than with West Mercian.

I turn next to the forms *amat*: *begeat* 12. Here Sievers proposed *begæt*, Anglian preterite singular of infinitive *begietan* (which may mean "procure for another"). Editors prefer this, although it makes less good sense than *begēat*, preterite of *begēotan* ("pour upon, infuse"), because it gives the supposedly required rhyme.<sup>6</sup> The preference would be justifiable if the pattern of rhyme was sufficiently regular; failing that, however, there must be an initial preference for MS *begeat*, marking the diphthong as long, and taking the word as the preterite of *begēotan* (Class II strong verb).

To sum up: the established view of the rhymes and assonances in the first 15 lines of the *Epilogue* does not stand up to rigorous scrutiny. On a strict count, four of the lines have assonance only (2, 9, 10, 13). One of the lines with consonance only in the MS (12) may be made to rhyme only by allowing what is to be proved—the Anglian origin of the passage—to prevail over editorial judgment. One of the lines (5) with consonance only in the MS still has consonance even if Sievers' Anglian forms are substituted: One of the lines (11) has neither internal rhyme, nor assonance, nor consonance. Miss Gradon's readings in lines 5 and 6 are better than Sievers' from the point of view of assonance and rhyme, but they are dialectally less conclusive.

The reader may nevertheless feel that there is a balance of probability in favour of the established view; on a generous count (though still including the intractable line 11 in the total) one might say that Sievers has 11/15 lines rhyming, Miss Gradon 12/15. The corresponding figures for assonance are 13/15 and 14/15 respectively. But it is time to look at some other features of the passage, and to examine the other possibility that was raised earlier: that the ornamentation in these lines is of too irregular a sort to warrant the drawing of conclusions about dialectal origins.

To note the facts is one thing; to know what to make of them is another. In line 1, for example, it is a fact that *þus* has two sorts of affinity with the rhyming words *fūs* and *hūs*—consonance and similarity of vowel, the difference being one of vowel length. But can anything be made of this? My guess is

that *þus* may be put down as an additional decoration; such near-rhymes as *þus*: *fūs*: *hūs* are frequent enough at any time. Dr Sisam notes one in MS Hatton 20:

Writ þus oððe bet oððe þine hyde forlet,  
 "Write thus or better, or lose your skin." The entry is in an early twelfth-century hand. There is, as Dr Sisam says, "an attempt at rhyme"; the vowel in *bet* is short, whereas that in *forlet* is long.<sup>7</sup> Such near-rhymes can also be eye-rhymes in MSS where vowel-length is not marked. There is some indication, discussed below, that assonances and consonances in the beginning of the Epilogue may be scribal and visual rather than phonetic.<sup>8</sup> Hence I include *þus* 1 as an additional decoration.

On the other hand, the fact that the initial consonants of *þus*, *þurh*, and *þæt* in line 1 are identical can hardly be significant, and I pay no further attention to it. Similarly with the lines that follow: I note what may possibly be significant, and pass in silence over other presumably non-significant facts. The reader's judgments may differ from mine now and then, but this will not matter unless the differences are numerous and weighty enough to tip the scales against my conclusion.

For example, the fact that every one of the first 15 lines of the Epilogue has double alliteration in the *a*-line can hardly be the product of multiple coincidence. Frequently there is further embroidery within the *a*-line. In MS *wordcræft wæf* 2a there is internal rhyme on *-æf*; if the editors are right to read *wordcræft[um]*, 2a illustrates what seems to be a favourite device: that is, linking the first word of the *a*-line to the first stressed word of the *b*-line by means of the ending *-um*; so also lines 8 and 9. A whole series of *-um* rhymes actually begins in the previous *b*-line, *weorcum* 7b; in the next line there is rhyme on *synnum*: *sorgum* 8, but in the next line the rhyme is more nearly complete on *bitrum*: *bisgum* 9. The MS has *besgum*, with *i* written above the *e*; the next word, which ends the line in the MS, is *be*. Evidently *besgum* was an error, written in anticipation of the next word and then corrected by the scribe; we should read *bisgum*. Lines 2b and 3a are similarly connected, *wundrum* and *þrægum*; so too perhaps are 15b and 16a, *lustum* and *willum*. The apparent tendency on occasion to run on from the *b*-line to the next *a*-line is relevant to a consideration of the seemingly aberrant line 11.

Some editors have been tempted to emend this, but the last word may be linked to four words in the two following lines by *cyn—ynd(e)*:

gamelum tō gēoce,      gife unscynde  
 Mægencyning āmæt, ond on gemynd begeat [begēat],  
 torht ontȳnde,      tidum gerȳmde.

The connexions here are as much scribal and visual as phonetic, although phonetically there is assonance on short *y* in lines 11 and 12. If *cyn* is a common element in *-scynde* and *-cyning*, the basis is not phonetic, because of course the initial consonants are [ʃ] and [k] respectively. If the assonance on short *y* continues to line 13, where the relevant vowels are long, *þus*, *fūs*: *hūs* in line 1, already discussed, may be compared.<sup>9</sup>

Since assonance may run on from line to line, *nihtes* 4a, *riht* 5a, *mihht* 6a; *geþeahht* 5b, *þeahht* 6b (and possibly, though with a long diphthong, *onwreāh* 7a) should be noted; these are of course the MS readings. The substitution of Anglian forms is necessary only if one assumes the assonance (or rhyme) of *a*-line to *a*-line, *b*-line to *b*-line, to be in need of improvement.

Line 14 has a complex construction. Apart from the usual alliteration, and full rhyme on *-and* in the last words of the *a-* and *b-* line, the sequence *-an-* appears five times; there is double assonance in *-cofan* 14a and *-locan* 14b, and the repetition of *on-* in both *a-* and *b-* line may be connected with *on* in the two previous lines and in the following line:

bANCOFAN *onband*                      brEOSTLOCAN *onwand*.

Let me now restate the position as I see it. I do not have to prove—and have not attempted to prove—that all of the possibly decorative features noted above came about as the result of Cynewulf's deliberate technique. It is a reasonably safe conclusion that the rhetoric in the first 15 lines of the Epilogue is heightened, as a preliminary to Cynewulf's runic "signature." Some aspects of this heightening are plain enough—for example, the double alliteration in all *a-* lines. Others, in varying degrees, are uncertain. What does seem certain is that the construction of these 15 lines is far from regular; in one line, some decorative feature appears, in another it is lacking.

In this respect Cynewulf's Epilogue containing his runic "signature," bears some resemblances to the verses at the end of Boniface's letter to Nithard, which contain the name NITHARDVS in the initial letters. The Latin verses have end-rhyme, but not consistently (*florentibus: viribus; domino: solio; cuneo: aethereo; apostolicis: laudibus* etc.); there are also comparable additional decorative features:

apostolorum editus    \*et prophetarum filius.

Boniface's poem, like Cynewulf's Epilogue, is concerned with virtue, death, and judgment.<sup>10</sup>

Or one might compare these lines of Alcuin, in which rhyme, assonance, and consonance variously appear:

Sed egi, vidi, feci, cum fecero favi,  
Et sedi, iuvi, fodi, cum fodero cavi,  
Hoc emi, sevi, sivi, cum sivero cevi,  
Hod odi, fovi, lavi, cum laverō iunxo.<sup>11</sup>

If this kind of thing is found in Anglo-Latin verse, would it then be fanciful to see *bāncofan onband*, *brēostlocan onwand* as a deliberately complex construction?

The crucial "rhyming" line in the beginning of the Epilogue is line 12. If this is read, as there is reason for it to be, as *Mægencynīng āmet, ond on gemynd begēat* (that is, keeping the MS reading, marking the diphthong in the last word as long, and understanding it as the preterite of *begēotan*) then we have an instance of consonance. One swallow does not make a summer, but it is not proof of winter either; if we have consonance in line 12, we may have it also in lines 5 and 6. It will be recalled that, even according to Sievers, we have it in line 5 (*reht: gepæht*). Since two out of the four lines with consonance in the MS may reasonably be allowed to retain it, there is no good case left for an Anglian substitution in line 6.

Still less, I think, did Sievers prove his case about *Christ (The Ascension)*, lines 591–2; considering the context of these lines, it is quite unsafe to infer Anglian origin on the basis that (Anglian) *hēndu: mērdū* 591 and *leht: neht* 592 "rhyme," whereas MS *hiendū: mērdū* and *leoht: niht* do not.<sup>12</sup> Much of what I have said above about the beginning of the Epilogue to *Elene* is equally relevant here; *Christ*, lines 587–599, in fact exhibit the same sort of irregular decoration by full-rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance, and consonance.

It remains only to observe briefly that the two forms of the poet's name found in the four runic "signatures," *Cynewulf* and *Cymwulf*, are inconclusive as to date and dialect; they indicate only that Cynewulf, if a Northumbrian, cannot be dated earlier than the ninth century, or if a Mercian, earlier than the late eighth.<sup>13</sup> After the ninth century, the two forms are of no dialectal significance whatever.

In matters like this, the burden of proof rests upon those who wish to depart from the MS readings, to suppose that the poetry was composed long before the MS was written, and to argue that the original dialect of composition was different from that in which the poetry is now known. In short, I do not have to prove Sievers wrong; it is sufficient to show that he has not proved himself right.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Kenneth Sisam, "Dialect Origins of the Earlier Old English Verse," *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), p. 122.
- <sup>2</sup> E. Sievers, "Miscellen zur angelsächsischen Grammatik," *PBB (Paul und Braune, Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur)*, IX (1884), 236 note; K. Sisam, "Cynewulf and his Poetry", Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture, March 1933 (*Proc. Brit. Acad.* XVIII) reprinted in *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, pp. 1-2; P.O.E. Gradon, ed., *Cynewulf's "Elene"* (London, 1958), pp. 13-14; D. Whitelock, ed., *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 15th ed. (Oxford, 1967), pp. 177, 280.
- <sup>3</sup> Sisam, *Studies*, p. 2.
- <sup>4</sup> Whitelock, *Reader*, p. 281; Gradon, edn., p. 14, note 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Gradon, edn., p. 13; A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1962), §§312, 314, 307.
- <sup>6</sup> Whitelock, *Reader*, p. 281; Gradon, edn., p. 72 (note to line 1247b).
- <sup>7</sup> Sisam, *Studies*, p. 111.
- <sup>8</sup> This is contrary to Dr Sisam's view (*Studies*, p. 25) that "the vernacular poet addressed himself primarily to the ear of a listener."
- <sup>9</sup> The temptation to speculate about the appearance of the element *CYN* here is strong; the runic "signature" *CYNEWULF* begins a few lines later. Considering the extraordinary acrostic ingenuity of Anglo-Latin writers (see note 10 below), it is scarcely possible for any hypothesis one might propose in this connexion to be "too ingenious"; but although one can—ingeniously—extract *CYNEWULF* from the MS of *Elene* 1236-51, I have not been able to accomplish this with any degree of plausibility, and therefore do not pursue the point at this time.
- <sup>10</sup> Sisam, *Studies*, p. 26 note 1, draws attention to Boniface's letter (printed in *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, ed. E. Duemmler, Tomus I (*MGH*, Berlin, 1964), p. 18). I am grateful to my friend and colleague B. K. Martin, particularly for advice about medieval Latin verse; to Professor Dorothy Whitelock, who read an earlier draft; and to Mrs Rosemary Huisman, Miss Jane McCartney, and Miss Pepita Conlon, who helped in the preparation of this paper.
- <sup>11</sup> "Versus Albini magistri de laude metricae artis feliciter Amen," *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, I, 347. For examples of Alcuin's acrostic ingenuity, see, e.g., *op. cit.*, pp. 224-27.
- <sup>12</sup> *PBB*, IX (1884), 236 note. The "presumable rhymes *mehte: crafte* or *mehte: crefte*" in *Juliana* 392 (Gradon, edn., p. 14, note 2) deserve a mention only for the sake of completeness.
- <sup>13</sup> Sisam, *Studies*, p. 6; Whitelock, *Reader*, p. 177; cf. Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, § 348.