

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XL

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School of English
University of Leeds
Leeds, England

ISSN 0075-8566

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XL

2009

Edited by

Alaric Hall

Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

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Skelt ‘Hasten’ in *Cleanness* and *St Erkenwald*

Andrew Breeze

Skelt is a rare verb. It occurs solely in the poems *Cleanness*, *St Erkenwald*, and *The Destruction of Troy*, all from Cheshire or its environs. In *Cleanness* (l. 827) angels visit Lot, but his resentful wife *scelt hem in scorne*.¹ Later, when Jerusalem is attacked, skirmishes are *skelt* (l. 1186); after besiegers spot King Zedekiah fleeing the city, the alarm is *skelt* (l. 1206). When writing appears at Belshazzar’s feast, scholars *skelten* (l. 1554) to it to find its meaning. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is silent on the first of these attestations, understands the second and third as ‘?to spread or scatter hurriedly’, and the last as ‘to hasten; to be diligent’. Quoting *St Erkenwald* (l. 278), it refers to those who *skeltone* or hasten to God. This attestation occurs the phrase ‘*Ʒe skilfulle and Ʒe unskathely skelton ay to me*’ as a translation of the Vulgate’s Psalm 14:2, ‘*qui ingreditur sine macula et operatur iustitiam*’ (the Douay Bible’s ‘He that walketh without spot, and worketh iustice’), where *skeltone* parallels *ingreditur* ‘walks’.² The *Oxford English Dictionary* further cites the participle *skelting* from *The Destruction of Troy* (ll. 1089, 6042), but calls the word’s origin ‘obscure’.

There has been little progress since. The late J. J. Anderson took the instances in *Cleanness* as meaning respectively ‘mocked’, ‘broke out’, ‘raised’, and ‘came hurrying’; that in *St Erkenwald* as ‘?hasten’; and *skeltyng of harme* in *The Destruction of Troy* as ‘?outbreak of trouble’. He thought the etymology was obscure, but saw possible links with Old Norse *skella* ‘make to slam, clash’, *skella á* ‘burst out (of a gale or storm); scold’, and compared Old Norse *skjalla* ‘clash’ and *skelkja* ‘mock’. He believed the English word was perhaps from Norse *skellt*, the past participle of *skella*.³ Translations by Andrew and Waldron resemble those of Anderson. Lot’s wife ‘reviled with scorn’; at the siege of Jerusalem skirmishes are ‘launched’; the outcry at Zedekiah’s escape is ‘launched high under the skies’; Belshazzar’s clerks ‘hastened’ to the writing to examine it.⁴ *Skeltone* in *St Erkenwald* is further noted by Burrow and Turville-Petre, who render it ‘hasten’ and (in the light of forms quoted by the *Middle English Dictionary*, including Modern English dialectal *skelt*) hesitantly derive it from old Norse.⁵

¹ *Cleanness*, ed. by J. J. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 34.

² *A Book of Middle English*, ed. by J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 212.

³ *Cleanness*, p. 82.

⁴ *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (London: Arnold, 1978), pp. 146, 161, 175.

⁵ *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. by Hans Kurath and others, 20 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), s.v. *skelten*; *A Book of Middle English*, pp. 212, 361.

Yet a Scandinavian etymology is unsatisfactory on semantic and phonological grounds. The correct derivation appears, rather, to be Irish. It is known that *Cleanness* and related poems contain Irish elements, due to tenth-century settlement by Norsemen from Ireland in the Wirral and beyond, where the names of Antrobus ‘the settlement’, Noctorum ‘dry hill’, and Liscard ‘court of the rock’ can be shown to be Irish (something rare in English toponymy).⁶ The author of *Cleanness* wrote in what seems to be a Cheshire dialect.⁷ He probably lived in the Wirral, perhaps at Storeton, a manor of the Stanley family.⁸ Storeton is less than five miles south of Noctorum and Liscard. Given this former Gaelic presence in Cheshire, Irish elements in the dialect or narrative themes of *Cleanness* or *St Erkenwald* need cause no surprise.⁹ As regards vocabulary, this includes such forms as *bobb* ‘cluster’ from Middle Irish *popp* ‘shoot, tendril’, or (in *St Erkenwald*) *art* ‘direction’, from Gaelic *aird* ‘(compass-)point’.

If, then, we seek not a Norse etymology for *scelt* but an Irish one, there is a case in Modern Irish *scaoilte* ‘loosened, freed, released, discharged, let go; separated; cast away’, the participle of *scaoilim* ‘I loose, set free’. The meanings here resemble those of *scelt*, as with the verb-noun, where *scaoileadh tionóil* is ‘dispersal of an assembly’. The parallels are still closer if we go to earlier senses of this verb in the spelling *scaílid* ‘bursts, scatters, spreads’ (hence *do scailetar na glais* ‘the locks burst open’, with third person plural simple past, in a sixteenth-century life of St Columba); ‘divides, scatters, separates’, of people (including troops), as with *scailit uad* ‘they scatter from him, they distance themselves from him’; ‘destroys’ (of buildings); and even ‘fires’ (of cannon).¹⁰ In tenth-century verse included in the prose saga *Serglige Con Culainn*, a warlord is referred to as one who *scaílid góu* ‘scatters spears’.¹¹ This sense ‘scatter, separate’ must be old, because Middle Irish *scaílid* has cognates in Welsh *chwalu* ‘to spread’ and Breton *c’hoalat* ‘to card (wool), to comb out and separate (wool) fibres for spinning’.¹²

So the meanings of the Irish verb (applied to the scattering of missiles and gatherings of men) overlap with those of *scelt* (used of the rapid spreading of angels, skirmishes, alarm, and learned men, and also trouble). On this basis, *scelt* will have no links with Scandinavian verbs meaning ‘slam’, ‘clash’, or ‘mock’. It would refer back to the scattering of men or weapons in Irish warfare. This etymology would also vindicate the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Their tentative definition ‘?to spread or scatter hurriedly’, with ‘to hasten; to be diligent’, suits borrowing from early Irish *scaílid* ‘bursts, scatters, spreads; divides, separates’, as the ‘mocked’, ‘reviled’, and ‘launched’ of later editors do not. The form will thus come, not from Norse *skellt*, the past participle of *skella* ‘make to slam, clash’, but from the early Irish past participle *scaílte* ‘burst, scattered, spread’, giving Modern Irish *scaoilte* ‘loosened, freed, released, discharged, let go’.

⁶ Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places* (Stamford: Tyas, 2000), pp. 260–62; Stephen Harding, *Viking Mersey* (Birkenhead: Countrywise, 2002), pp. 43, 44.

⁷ Ad Putter and Myra Stokes, ‘The Linguistic Atlas and the Dialect of the *Gawain* Poems’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 106 (2007), 468–91; cf. R. W. Barrett, *Against All England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p. 256.

⁸ A. C. Breeze, ‘Sir John Stanley (c. 1350–1414) and the *Gawain*-Poet’, *Arthuriana*, 14 (2004), 15–30, as against J. J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the ‘Gawain’-Poems* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 2–3.

⁹ Rory McTurk, *Chaucer and the Norse and Celtic Worlds* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 90–91.

¹⁰ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913–76), S columns 67–69.

¹¹ *Serglige Con Culainn*, ed. by Myles Dillon, *Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series*, 14 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1953), p. 6.

¹² Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l’ancien irlandais: Lettres R S* (Paris: CNRS, 1974), S-28.