

About Representing Syntax and Meter

The oldest written text of *Beowulf* that we know was devised a thousand years ago. We have had printed text representing metrical ‘lineation’ for the past six or seven generations. Then came text accompanied by full glossing of its vocabulary and parsing of its sentences: Klaeber’s editions excelled in bringing together critical text, lexical and grammatical information, a virtual concordance of its words, and commentary of many useful kinds. They did very little with meter, and virtually nothing with syntax, let alone the interaction of the two in the extraordinary verbal art of the poem. The reasons are not far to seek. Meter was understood then essentially as a taxonomy of halfline groups of syllables sorted according to their number, their stress, and their length, the groups linked in pairs by alliteration. It was represented accordingly—and sparingly. Syntax was represented by careful use of punctuation and by parsing in the Glossary. It was nearly a generation after Klaeber’s third edition that a more useful graphic system for representing syntactic structures was developed.

The twelve textual representations offered here, each with commentary, are intended to clarify (and celebrate) the relations between the syntax and meter in the verbal art of *Beowulf*. The commentaries are vignettes of literary analysis. The textual representations are tree diagrams of the constituent structure of selected sentences, fitted to metrical ‘diagrams,’ i.e., printing the text-string as ‘line’ and ‘halfline’ structures.

The first of these twelve originated in the classroom, as so many useful things do. It was presented as a reminder, as the course in *Beowulf* began, that Old English grammatical inflections and valence features in the lexicon were functioning parts of *that* language and can’t be ignored. When it was reworked on paper—no longer as ephemeral as chalk and talk—it changed from a device for teaching into a device for learning. Where *do* we attach **in gēardagum** in the opening sentence of the poem? Is it a modifier of the predicate, or the verb, or the complement, or the proposition of the whole sentence? *I think* it is placed right and am fairly sure it is not placed wrong in the diagram unless for not being allowed to have ambivalence: the meter plays wonderful tricks on our habitual concepts of syntax. Then, how to represent graphically the two complements of the main-clause verb **ge-frunon**? One is a noun, the other a clause (by traditional analysis therefore called a ‘noun clause’). In the course of many attempts to devise appropriate representation of the sentence, the symbol \simeq came to mind, signifying ‘similar or equal to.’ It seemed just right for sentence diagramming, especially so for a text like that of *Beowulf*. The reasons for its rightness lay in neither syntax nor meter, but in their coefficient.

The fourth—for **Bēowulf mapelode, bearn Ecgþēowes**—began as part of an exercise in judging the value, limitations, and drawbacks of various diagramming conventions. The form argued for here, pictured in the lower portion of Fig. 4, caused distress, amusement, and panic among the students, most of them in linguistics or ESL programs. And no wonder: the tree diagram began right, with

branches growing downward (!), but then unnaturally, it seemed, a branch took root and sprouted its own branches growing upward. The reasons for adopting this representation are given in the commentary. The exercise persuaded me once for all of the teaching power of graphic representation in combining metrical form and syntactic structure. It beggars the syntactic-rhetorical notion of ‘appositive’ in understanding the verbal art of *Beowulf*.

The fifth and sixth representations were undertaken for the challenge of getting all of the parts of elaborate, diplomatically coded sentences into single pictures. The variations here are fairly plain appositives, which can be explicated in semantic terms, thence in terms of speakers’ subtexts, and so on. When syntax and meter both are represented, a striking trait of the poet’s style stands out plainly: avoid variants of the same topic within a single metrical line.

The notation \simeq for ‘similar or equal’ grammatical elements (same syntactic function, same or different structure) proved its value in another way when combined with the notation Δ for ‘empty’ or ‘deleted element.’ A syntactic constituent turns up empty, i.e., unspoken, when its spoken form can be inferred from the context. Most often it is a case of ‘here would be that element again.’ Deletion ‘under identity’ may be as simple as omission of the subject in a subordinate clause (Figs. 2 and 10), or in a coordinate clause (Fig. 6, conclusion), or subject and **seal** (Fig. 8). Or it may be a way of linking sentences narrating linked actions even when those sentences are separated by others of direct discourse (Fig. 9). But the virtuoso artistry entailing deletion and variation together, represented in Fig. 11, needs a combination of notation like the one given. The wonderful closing sentence of the poem, represented in Fig. 12, starts with smaller effects of variation and deletion before developing a counterpoint of metrical and syntactic patterns unlike any other in the entire poem.

A word about what these representations do NOT do. They carry none of the baggage of syntactic theory. That should be guessed right away from such impromptu labeling as the opening word **Hwæt** as ‘Text starter’ or an *oððæt*-clause as a ‘Time-to clause.’ But mainly there is no implication that any structure can be traced back through generative or transformational procedures to a simple, positive, declarative ‘S.’ Any implication of procedure is just the opposite, lying in the steps entailed in working back and forth within the sentences as given, and in understanding their artful shapings. Even the notion of ‘sentence’ conditioned by modern conventions of punctuation is often called into question by the alternate method of representing text of the poem.

Even more obvious is the independence from any particular metrical theory. One need not choose sides on the issue of syllable stress or syllable timing as the basis of meter, for example.

Various modes of representing the verbal composition of *Beowulf* have their several values. The usual printed texts provide punctuation as a guide to understanding the syntax, and they divide the text into verse lines and half-lines as a guide to construing the meter. They can not point up the interaction of meter

and syntax as well as the tree diagrams with metrical lineation illustrated here. On the other hand, the whole text of the poem doesn't need to be displayed as a vast forest of syntactic trees.

That brings us to an often overlooked representation of *Beowulf* which provides additional—and unexpected—information and guidance: the oldest text, a manuscript written by the only native speakers of Old English known to have represented the whole poem in graphic form (see commentary on Fig. 11). Besides representing phonemic strings (the spellings of the words), it partially represents by a system of graphotactics the prosodic complement to meter and syntax—another neglected element in study of the verbal art of *Beowulf*.

Accordingly, to each of the twelve commentaries is appended yet another textual representation—transcription of the manuscript text that includes notation of its graphotactic features. A note of caution about 'reading' the graphotactics of these brief texts: their interpretation is not as simple as, for example, equating lineal measure of spacing with durational measure of utterance. There is a correlation between them, pretty clearly, but other elements (such as morphemic structure of words) affect the graphotactics as well. The complete *Beowulf* text with these features represented, on this website, can assist in the interpretation of the separate passages chosen for this set of representations and commentary.

And so altogether there are three representations for each of twelve small samples of text from this incomparable poem: the very modern syntactic tree diagrams, which are overlaid upon conventional lineation for meter, along with notation of the graphotactics of its oldest alphabetical analog.