

INTRODUCTION

Argument

This text of *Beowulf* is unique in representing not only the alphabetic and other written symbols but also the incidence and close measure of spacings between those symbols in the manuscript text which is our sole direct source of information about that marvelous literary composition. Both the written symbols and the spacings between them carry textual information.

Standard editions of *Beowulf* disregard the manuscript spacings, assuming them to be irrelevant, if not arbitrary and capricious. If the latter were the case, one would have to disregard in turn the countless regularities of spacing features such as the following; the superscript numerals represent the relative measure of spacings between strings of letters:

0633 ⁴ mid ² mīnra ⁴ secga ³ ge⁻¹-driht ⁵

1672 ⁴ mid ² þīnra ⁴ secga ³ ge⁻¹-dryht /

0357 ⁵ mid ³ his ⁴ eorla / ge⁻²-driht. ⁵

0662 ⁵ mid ⁴ his ³ hæ/leþa ⁴ ge⁻¹-dryht ⁵

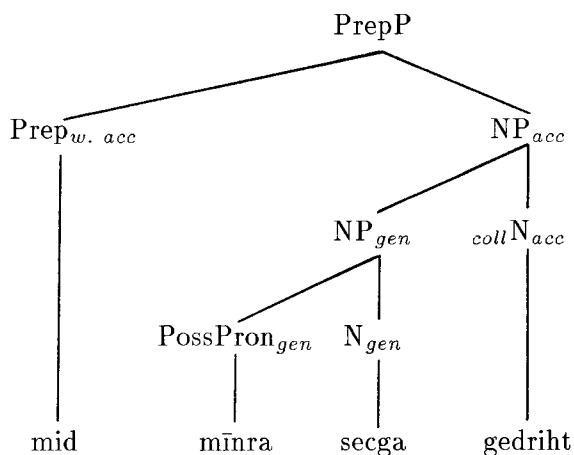
0431 ⁴ *₇ [?] mīnra ⁴ eorla ⁴ ge⁻¹-dryht. ⁴

0118 ⁴ æþelinga ³ ge⁻²-driht ⁴

All six occurrences of *ge-driht* in this text have a preceding genitive plural noun as a phrasal dependent in the same verse, and all are found in *b*-verses. (All six are in the copy by the first scribe.) That is, *ge-driht* occurs every time in the construction



That is the whole structure of 118*b*. It occurs with expansion in the other instances, four with the preposition *mid*:



The remaining example is similar, with conjunction **ond* (supplied) instead of preposition *mid*. The spacings clearly are not arbitrary or capricious, at least being related to syntax.

Or to illustrate spacing patterns in a prose text, Fig. 1 reproduces half a page from British Library MS Royal 15.B.xxii, one of the manuscript texts of Ælfric's *Grammar* of Latin; below it is a conventional editorial representation of the text. This *Grammar* is composed in English, describing a language foreign to native speakers of English. It is a teaching text, to be read aloud from in the process of instruction, presumably, and at any rate to be as clear as possible in transmitting information through a graphic analog of speech, a fixed text.

It is meaningless to refer to "normal word spacing" in a text of this kind. Some word sequences are written without intervening space, some words have internal spacing, and the spacing between letter strings that correspond to words is anything but normative. Certainly it is not a function of justifying the right margin, as in printing, in which spacings (occurring between words only) are equalized in the range of each printed line, and words are divided with hyphen when needed in justifying the right margin. Instead, the spacings—where they occur, and their relative magnitudes—correspond in part to the sequence of syntactic constructions: nothing could be clearer in the written text of the first sentence (from majuscule G of *Gramma* to the space preceding majuscule S of *Se cræft*). Pointing is ancillary, and so is use of majuscule letters and rubrication. Spacings also correspond in part to morphotactic patterns, as in *stæf-cræft* (first sentence), *lēden-spræce* (second sentence), and so on. Fig. 2 presents text edited to include the spacings for their locations, their morphological contexts, and their magnitudes.

The textual information encoded in spacings has been little studied and less understood, a predictable result of English (and Germanic) philology having developed mainly on the basis of the information encoded in printed editions of *Beowulf*, Ælfric's *Grammar*, and the other Anglo-Saxon texts. Printed editions imposed conventions of printing on the texts that were then studied and reduced

beforan . TRIGINTA DIUISIONES . GRAMMATICE
Gramma . on grēcisc . is *littera* on lēden: *ARTIS* .
 7 on englisc stæf . 7 *grammatica* is stæf cræft . Se cræft
 geopenað 7 gehylt . leden spræce . 7 nan mann næfð
 leden boca andgit befullon būton he þone cræft
 cunne . Se cræft is eall þa bōclīcra cræfta ord
 fruma . 7 grundweall . *Grammaticus* . is se ðe cann
 þone cræft *grammaticam* befullan . 7 se cræft hæfð
 þritig tōdāl . þe forme tōdāl is ^{stemn} *uox* . þe oðer ^{stæf} *littera*
 þe þridde is ^{stæf-gefeg} *sillaba* . Be þissum þrim tōdālum þe
 . . .
 awriton on forwerdre þyssere bēc . 7 se cræft þyssere

FIG. 1. British Library MS Royal 15.B.xxii, fol. 65r.

TRIGINTA DIUISIONES GRAMMATICE ARTIS

Gramma on Grēcisc is *littera* on lēden, and on Englisc *stæf*; ond *grammatica* is stæfcræft. Se cræft ge-openað and ge-hylt lēden-spræce, and nān man næfð lēdenbōca andgit befullon būton hē þone cræft cunne. Se cræft is eallra bōclīcra cræfta ordfruma ond grundweall. *Grammaticus* is, sē ðe cann þone cræft *grammaticam* befullan. And se cræft hæfð þritig tōdāl. þæt forme tōdāl is *uox* 'stemn.' þæt oðer *littera* 'stæf.' þæt þridde is *sillaba* 'stæf-gefeg.' Be þissum þrim tōdālum wē āwriton on forewerdre þyssere bēc....

Gramma in Greek is *littera* in Latin, and in English *staff*; and *grammatica* is *staff-craft* [i.e., the art of letters]. That craft reveals and rules the Latin language, and no one has understanding of latin-books entirely unless he knows that craft [i.e., grammar]. The craft is the beginning and foundation of all book-like arts. *Grammaticus* is that one who knows the art of grammar entirely. And that craft has thirty divisions. The first division is *uox* '(vocal) sound.' The second *littera* 'letter.' The third is *sillaba* 'syllable.' We have written about these three divisions in the early part of this book. . . .

Gram¹ma. ⁷ on ⁰ grēcisc. ⁴ is ⁰ littera ⁴ on ¹ lēden ⁹ and ⁰ on ¹ englisc ⁴ stæf. ⁵
and ⁰ grammatica ⁴ is ² stæf-²-cræft. ⁷ Se ⁰ cræft ⁹ ge-¹-openað ⁴ and ⁰ ge-¹-hylt
³ lēden-¹-spræce. ⁵ and ¹ nān ¹ man ² næfð ⁹ lēden-¹-bōca ⁶ andgit ³ be-¹-fullon ⁶
būton ² hē ² þone ² cræft ⁹ cunne. ⁶ Se ⁰ cræft ⁴ is ¹ eall³ra ³ bōc-¹-licra ⁴ cræfta
⁵ ord-⁹-fruma. ⁶ and ⁰ grund-²-weall. ⁷ Grammaticus. ³ is ¹ sē ⁰ ðe ⁰ cann ⁹ þone
³ cræft ⁴ grammaticam ³ be-⁰-fullan. ³ and ¹ se ⁰ cræft ³ hæfð ⁹ þritig ⁴ tō-¹-dāl.
⁷ þæt ² forme ¹ tō-¹-dāl ³ is. ² uox. ⁶ stemn ⁸ þæt ¹ oðer. ³ littera. ⁹ stæf ⁸ þæt
² þridde ³ is. ³ sillaba. ⁷ stæf-gefeg ⁸ Be ⁰ þissum ⁴ þrim ² tō-¹-dālum ³ wē ⁹
ā-⁰-writon ⁴ on ⁰ fore-²-werdre ³ þyssere ² bēc. ⁷ . . .

FIG. 2. Text shown in FIG. 1 edited with graphotactic information.

to rules. Those conventions did not materially affect the information encoded in the alphabetical elements of the original texts. On the other hand, they obliterated the information encoded in the spacings between letter-groups. Spacing was assigned to word boundaries alone. Its measures were then equalized within each line of print to accommodate the fixed width of the type-frame.* The letters were cast in metal that couldn't be shrunk or stretched. There was no common understanding of the text between its original composer and its modern compositor.

Now, if the spacing features in the prose text turn out to have extensive correlations with syntactic and morphotactic patterns, should the spacing be inferred to derive from the syntax and word formation in the sentences? Although the ultimate answer most probably has to be Yes, to infer that the derivation is direct is to leave altogether out of account a performative aspect that these sentences would normally have had: they were composed so that they could be spoken and heard in the service of instruction. The prosodic elements of speech provide cues for the recognition of the syntactics and morphotactics of the utterances. In short, the most obvious and natural inference is that the spacing features in the written text provide an analog to prosodic features of the spoken text; they would have been derived from them, and their purpose was in turn to cue the segmentation of the syllable string into meaningful constructions and to guide the appropriate linkages of those constructions in sentences.

The text of *Beowulf* is similar though certainly not identical. The pointing is sparse, the use of pointing and majuscule letters together is rare in relation to the number of sentence boundaries, and there is no rubrication. On the other hand, the two texts have much in common, both in the varied magnitude of the spacings and in the locations of the spacings in the graphic analog to a linguistic continuum. This being so, the patternings of spacing and their magnitudes in a

* A partial exception is Charles Plummer's *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*; see, for example, the opening lines of the entry for 894.

verse text should help us to identify those performative aspects of the sentences in speech that were encoded in the written analog, and whose function may be to regenerate the prosodic cues that form part of the text when it is read (performed) from the page. The prosodic features should then reflect the syntax and larger morphology just as in prose texts, as well as the syllabication where it is relevant to the text. And then, where the spacing patterns differ from those of prose texts, it is just there that we can expect to find some evidence of the difference between metered and non-metered performances. It is hard (for me, anyway) to suppose that it is not meter that causes the differences in the graphotactics of a metered text.

That is one line of reasoning. Another begins with considering what things the divisions of written symbols do not correlate with in this text, so that they can be set aside. First, division between lines of writing has no relation to division into metrical “lines”: that is, there is no graphic analog to the verse line. Division of the text occurs at sentence boundaries—however narrowly or broadly one defines “sentence”—but with nothing like regularity or any sort of predictability. Division between the narrative voice and the beginning or ending of direct discourse has no distinctive or consistent marking: typical is *Wealhðeo mapelode* (1215) which signals the beginning of her words; ... *dōð swā ic bidde · Eode þā tō setle* (1232) signals her words having finished.

Further, division of letter-strings in *Beowulf* is not at all restricted to word boundaries (again however narrowly or broadly the term is defined). The sequence of letters must be broken every time the writing comes to the right margin of the text-space. Even so, the right margin is ragged: the division may be at a syllable boundary which is not a morpheme boundary; it may be at a root or prefix boundary, or it may be at a word boundary (any of these will be a syllable boundary as well); virtually without exception it occurs at one of these places. Even this rules out arbitrariness of divisions, in strict terms. Moreover, the places of the divisions of text within a line of writing are of exactly the same kinds as those that occur at the right margin of text. This emphatically rules out the location of spacing being arbitrary.

With such frequent spacing of letter-strings, with the specific linguistic positions at which they occur, and with the variability in measure of the spacings—with all this “busyness” the text can hardly be a hasty or careless production. I believe it is a deliberate, committed, serious written composition, the last place to expect textual arbitrariness. The variations in spacing will be discussed later, with the same inference about their significance.

Yet another line of reasoning begins by asking, What is the best notation system for poetic texts of Old English? From our point of view it would be a system encoding everything we need in order to understand the meter of texts on *leoðcræft geworht*. If rhythmic recurrence of prominent syllables is part of the meter, regular timing of prominent syllables should have graphic representation of some kind. But that also would require notation for syllable prominence. And if prominence could be realized by more than one phonological feature—say, either

stress or length—that should be accommodated in the notation system as well. Then what about phonological features such as those that can identify phrase-domain and clause boundaries, which may be turn be concomitants of some kind of metrical domain?

But the texts were not composed for us. So the line of reasoning probably should be changed to begin instead by asking, What is the best notation for English verse that might have emerged by the late tenth century? The basic notation system for any text, whether verse, prose narrative, a legal proceeding, a grammar of Latin, then as now was alphabetical. Its marks were principally letters in sequence. That was sufficient, obviously, when it is remembered that many early Latin texts consisted of alphabetical symbols in unbroken succession. Then before writing English became common, spacing of segments of text was evolved by Insular readers as an aid to reading Latin.*

Apparently the only means already in hand in the tenth century for writing English vernacular verse were alphabetic symbols in lineal succession and spacings of linguistic segments. The spellings could have been improved some, of course, but not developed to represent any new kind of information. The spacing, on the other hand, could be developed to represent linguistic information that the alphabetic system could not. There was no need for a different kind of system, say, to mark sentence-syntax, since that was already encoded in sequence patterns of words, the valence of the lexical items, and the grammatical inflections. But variable spacing could clarify constituent structures and certainly it was developed in this way for some prose texts (as illustrated in Fig. 1). There was no need either to mark word-stress for native speakers. Phrase-accent, on the other hand, could be signified at least indirectly by variable spacing, in its correlation with constituent structure marking. In this way spacing could also have represented some prosodic information (as I believe it did).

In short, the manuscript text of *Beowulf* has much information that has been eliminated in its standard editions, some of which is represented in the present edition alone.

* The history of this is traced in detail by Paul Saenger in *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*.