Quantity matters in the meter of *Beowulf* and other early English poems. It matters in the form of a metrical principle known as resolution. Metrical resolution served alliterative poets as a way of counting; it can serve modern scholars as evidence for the cultural meanings of verse craft. This paper therefore has two sections: *How it Works* and *What it Means.*

*How it Works*

Metrical resolution operates at the conjunction of metrical stress and syllabic quantity. Resolution works like this: a metrically stressed, quantitatively short syllable plus the following syllable is equivalent to a metrically stressed, quantitatively long syllable. Short stressed + any = long stressed. In the wacky math of alliterative meter, 1 + 1 = 1. Both sides of the equation count as a single metrically strong position, or ‘lift.’ Short syllables are those with an etymologically short vowel followed by zero consonants. #1 on your handout gives two examples of metrical resolution in action. In Old English meter, resolution is quasi-obligatory. (I can say more about this in the Q&A.)

The relevance of metrical stress is what distinguishes resolution from the quantitative principles of classical meters. In alliterative meter, two adjacent *unstressed*, short syllables never add up to one long syllable. In other words, the first of the two syllables undergoing resolution must be one that receives stress. (In alliterative verse, metrical stress is assigned by prosodic weight: content words, such as nouns, receive stress, while function words, such as pronouns, do not.)

In Old English meter, resolution works in harmony with a number of other principles in the metrical system. The quantitative principle is like one functionality of a multifarious and well-oiled machine. The experience of applying resolution in versification and scansion must have been
something like this: once metrical stress is assigned to a syllable, check the quantity. If long, count
the syllable as a lift. If short, look to the right and count the next syllable together with the first
syllable as a lift.

So resolution is a way of counting. It is equally important in historical perspective, as
evidence for the development of the alliterative meter. The standard narrative has been that
resolution fell into disuse around the time of the Norman Conquest (1066), along with most other
features of Old English meter.

More recently, however, Nicolay Yakovlev has demonstrated that resolution continued to be
used in alliterative verse into the thirteenth century. Yakovlev convincingly identifies the use of
resolution in Lawman’s *Brut*, a twelfth-century alliterative verse chronicle. #2 on your handout
provides an example of resolution in the *Brut*. Obviously this judgment depends on an idea of what
metrical patterns were acceptable to Lawman. It is only by assuming a certain metrical pattern that
you can project resolution in the first place. The same is true, by the way, of Old English meter, but
I didn’t mention it earlier because we know a lot about the metrical patterning of Old English verse.
Before Yakovlev, we knew next to nothing about the metrical patterning of the *Brut*. In Early Middle
English alliterative meter, resolution is optional rather than quasi-obligatory.

Yakovlev’s arguments about metrical resolution are one small part of a paradigm-shifting
demonstration that the alliterative meter was in continuous use from the seventh to the sixteenth
century. This conclusion flies in the face of 75 years of metrical and literary scholarship. You may
have heard of the Alliterative Revival. According to Yakovlev, no such movement occurred. For
Yakovlev, metrical resolution is one vector of formal continuity in metrical history. In other words,
resolution helps us see that the meter used in Lawman’s *Brut* is a later instantiation of the meter used
in *Beowulf*: significantly changed, yes, but through continuous development rather than reinvention.
Finally, let's bring our story to the end of the alliterative tradition: the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, the age of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The story here is simple. Resolution really did die out. Everyone agrees that resolution is no longer functional in Middle English alliterative meter. #3 on your handout provides an example of the lack of metrical resolution in Middle English alliterative verse.

To sum up, resolution was a historically dynamic feature of the English alliterative meter. Resolution was in use from the earliest recorded poems in the seventh and eighth centuries down to the beginning of the thirteenth century. First it was quasi-obligatory; then it became an optional feature; then it disappeared. The alliterative meter incorporated quantity for at least five centuries but then continued to evolve without quantity for three more centuries.

*What it Means*

Most immediately, metrical resolution means that alliterative poets were thinking about quantity in the process of versification and scansion. I want to emphasize how odd that is. Resolution recapitulates equivalences that are thought to have obtained in prehistoric Old English, when quantity played a larger role in the regulation of syllables. Yet resolution remained a feature of alliterative meter as late as c. 1200. So one way to understand resolution is as a metrical vestige: a linguistic principle became encoded as a metrical principle, and the metrical principle then outlived the linguistic one by centuries. By the time Lawman employed it, resolution had become a highly artificial principle, only thinkable in the context of a durable poetic tradition.

Alliterative poets were thinking about quantity in vernacular versification, but this thinking lay on a different conceptual plane from theoretical knowledge about Latin metrics. English alliterative verse rose and fell before poets began experimenting with classical quantities in English
verse. The last alliterative poems also predate the earliest treatises on English meter. Obviously these two historical developments, metrical and intellectual, are directly connected: you cannot employ classical quantities in English meter until English meter becomes a reputable object of academic attention. And that did not happen until the closing decades of the sixteenth century. By then, the alliterative meter had already gone defunct. Alliterative poets have left behind no *ars poetica* and very little explicit commentary of any kind on their own metrical practice in the vernacular. Poets probably learned alliterative meter tacitly, through repeated imitation of their predecessors. Therefore, metrical resolution in the alliterative tradition was almost certainly not a learned imitation of classical meter. So another way of understanding resolution is as a cultural phenomenon: an illustration of how metrical features can function and fall away in the absence of explicit prosodic theory.

Partly because of the lack of an *ars poetica*, it has proven difficult for modern scholars to reconstruct alliterative verse. Since the early nineteenth century, alliterative meter has most often been described as accentual, but this is an overstatement. The quantitative principle coexisted with the accentual principle in the eleventh, twelfth, and early thirteenth centuries. Alliterative meter in these centuries was a blended form, accentual-quantitative. Moreover, Yakovlev has made the stunning argument that Old English meter was not accentual at all. In a recent essay, Ian Cornelius analyzes the significance of this claim. So a third way of understanding resolution is as a historiographical corrective: a reminder that alliterative verse was more complexly organized than you might have heard.

Metrical vestige, cultural phenomenon, historiographical corrective: in promising new research, quantity in the alliterative tradition is all of these, and more.
Quantity in the Alliterative Tradition
Eric Weiskott, Boston College

S=lift without metrical resolution
Sr=lift with metrical resolution
x=unstressed syllable

1. Metrical resolution in Old English verse

Beowulf 3a  hū đa gehelingas  xxSrSx (=xxSSx, not xxSxSx)  ‘how the noblemen...’
Battle of Maldon 6b  yrhðo geholian  SxxSrSx (=SxxSx, not SxxSxx)  ‘suffer cowardice’

2. Metrical resolution in Early Middle English alliterative verse

Lawman, Brut 144b  & þene dēað holien  xxxSSrx (=xxxSSx, not xxxSSxx)  ‘and suffer death’

3. Lack of metrical resolution in Middle English alliterative verse

Gawain 6b  and pātrounes bǐcôme  xSxxxxSx (not xSxxxxSr=xSxxxx)  ‘and became overlords’

4. Related publications


