The Accentual Paradigm in English metrics: Or, why we don't talk more about quantity

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[Read 8 January 2016 in Austin, TX, at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, session number 218, “Quantity in English Verse: Linguistic and Neuroscience-Based Challenges to the Accentual Paradigm.” This short historiographical paper was the half-time show in our roundtable—a brief interlude between the session’s more substantive linguistic contributions. It draws from my article “The Accentual Paradigm in Early English Metrics,” which appeared in the October 2015 issue of The Journal of English and Germanic Philology.]

The operations of quantity in early English meters are modern discoveries, brought to light by modern sciences of philology and linguistics. Medieval poets clearly had an intuitive sense of these phenomena, but their epistemological framing was different: they lacked the specific concepts, modes of reasoning and forms of attention that underwrite the descriptive statements of the two previous papers. This observation has the appearance of an uninformative verity, but it conceals an important historical paradox: the epistemological frame that has enabled description of English meters has also made it difficult to perceive and conceptualize the operation of quantity in English meters.

This paradox may be traced to a particular historical moment and a particular scene of inquiry: the study of Old English meter in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. Modern study of Old English meter got its start in these years, in the writings of J.J. Conybeare, Rasmus Rask, and Joseph Bosworth. The only significant previous treatment was that of George Hickes, contained in his 1705 Thesaurus. Hickes had sought to construe Old English verse as quantitative, after the model of classical Greek and Latin verse; Conybeare, Rask, and Bosworth broke decisively with Hickes’ classicism. They held that the earliest English meters were based not in quantity but in the patterning of “emphasis,” or stress accent. With that proposal, they established a new research paradigm, one that quickly became dominant in British circles. In 1838, Edwin Guest made accentual rhythm the uniform organizing principle of English poetry, from Caedmon to the present. Guest’s History of English Rhythms was the most important treatment of its subject prior to Saintsbury’s History of English Prosody. Walter Skeat crystallized this sequence of metrical inquiry in his essay on alliterative poetry. Indeed, whenever later scholars have described English alliterative verse as “strong stress,” they simply report the state of knowledge achieved by Skeat in 1868.

By the end of the nineteenth century the picture had become more complicated. Scholarship by Germans, culminating in the work of Eduard Sievers, had re-established considerations of quantity in Old English metrics. Yet even here the accentual paradigm retained much of its conceptual force. The “Five-type system” of Sievers-Bliss metrics is named for rhythms established by stress accent; quantity is registered, but it is conceptually subordinated to stress accent. Likewise, the metrical phonology of Middle English weak final -e is typically presented within a framework of stress metrics.

To sum up: A modern discipline of English metrics emerged precisely with the renunciation of classical models and the “discovery” of stress accent as a principle of
metrical organization. Those moves constituted a real advance over the classicism and confusions of the eighteenth century; an influential sequence of scholarship, running from Conybeare to Skeat and beyond, proposed to reduce English prosody to a single channel and sought to generalize this one-channel prosody across the entire history and diversity of English verse. Those reductions were characteristic of their moment, but they provide an inadequate tool-kit for description of English meters. The previous two presentations describe phenomena of quantity in several medieval meters. The next two show how poets of the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries have continued to attend to quantity, even as the handbooks and treatises directed attention away from it.