

The Classification of Alliterating Finite Verbs in Double Alliterating Verses in Old English Poetry*

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1. Introduction: Stressed Particles in Double Alliteration

In the prosody of Old English poetry, we can look for a few exceptions or cruces; the treatment of metrical stress on finite verbs in double alliterating verses might be one such exception. Single alliteration also might have the same issue; nevertheless, I will deal only with the finite verbs participating in double alliteration in this paper. According to Bliss (1967), we must first classify which words in the verse-clause bear metrically significant stresses when we discuss accentual metre. Bliss relies on the terminology used by Kuhn (1933), who divides words in Old English verse-clauses into three groups: “‘stressed elements’ (*Satzteile*), ‘particles’ (*Satzpartikeln*) and ‘proclitics’ (*Satzteilpartikeln*).” Bliss defines stressed elements as bearing “a metrical stress irrespective of the position they occupy in the verse-clause: they include nouns, infinitives, participles, adjectives and certain adverbs” and proclitics as standing “immediately before the stressed element with which they are most closely connected, and are then unstressed; but, like particles, if they are displaced they acquire a positional stress, and are treated like stressed elements: they include prepositions, certain pronouns, and articles” (*Metre of Beowulf* 6; cf. Kuhn, 1-109). Finite verbs are classified as particles, and are not stressed unless they are displaced from their normal position:

Particles normally stand either before or after the first stressed element (that is, in the first thesis of the verse-clause), and in this position they are unstressed; if they are displaced from this position they acquire a positional stress, and are treated in all respects like stressed elements: they include finite verbs, certain adverbs, certain pronouns, and conjunctions. (*Metre of Beowulf* 6)

Bliss points out that a finite verb is assumed to bear a stress when it is placed between a particle or more than one particle and one stress-word, or when there is no stress-word in the clause (*Metre of Beowulf* 7). Take, for example, the next verse I quote from *Phoenix*:

wrixleð wōðcræfte (*Phoenix*, 127a)
[sings song]

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Following Bliss's classification of finite verbs (as I will mention later), it should be certain that *wrixleð* participates in alliteration, but it does not have a stress. However, two questions remain: Are these finite verbs part of "accidental" alliteration? "Accidental" alliteration occurs, according to Momma, "in unambiguously unstressed words such as conjunctions, personal pronouns, and light adverbs" and is distinguished from "functional" alliteration ("Metrical Stress on Alliterating Finite Verbs" 196, n.23). If they are "accidental," why do they alliterate, especially in double alliterating verses?

Finite verbs as well as some adverbs, pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions raise the issue of whether an alliterating particle or proclitic in a double alliterating verse can bear a stress. In this paper, as part of my master's thesis, I will focus on finite verbs because they participate in double alliteration comparatively frequently than other particles and proclitics. Therefore, I examine whether the rhythmic pattern becomes impossible when an alliterating finite verb (or two finite verbs) invariably bears a stress; then I reinterpret several ambiguous instances.

2. Bliss's Study (1967)

In his study of *Beowulf*, Bliss examined whether a finite verb alliterated or not when it was not preceded by the first lift in a verse. He found 580 instances and classified them broadly into two groups: auxiliaries (with quasi-auxiliaries that correlate with a dependent infinitive) and non-auxiliaries. Out of 165 instances of auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries, alliterating verbs accounted for only 29 (18 percent) (*Metre of Beowulf* 23).¹ Out of the 415 instances of non-auxiliaries that had relatively full semantic significance, alliterating verbs were 335 (81 percent). He divided these non-auxiliaries into nine groups according to the position of the verb in the verse clause:

- (1) The verb is preceded by a stressed element;
- (2) The verb is in apposition to a verb in group (1) that immediately precedes it;
- (3) The verb is the only particle before the first stressed element;
- (4) The verb is the last particle before the first stressed element;
- (5) The verb is the last particle but one before the first stressed element;
- (6) The verb is the last particle but two before the first stressed element;
- (7) The verb forms a whole clause in itself;
- (8) The verb is the last particle in a clause that contains no stressed elements;

¹ He does not count the verb "to be" among these auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries.

(9) The verb is the last particle but one in a clause that contains no stressed elements.
(Bliss, *Metre of Beowulf* 10)

Out of these nine groups, the finite verbs of groups (1) and (2) bear stresses and alliteration (except for two instances in group (2)) (*Metre of Beowulf* 11)²; Bliss claims that these instances must be treated as stressed elements because the finite verbs of these verses have been displaced from their normal position among the particles and moved to the beginning of the clause (*Metre of Beowulf* 10-11).³ In group (4), since the verb is the last of a number of particles before the first stressed element, it is assimilated into the stressed elements and alliterates (except for two instances) (*Metre of Beowulf* 14)⁴. As is the case with (4), the finite verb of (8) also cannot be scanned at all unless the verb is stressed and alliterated (*Metre of Beowulf* 19). However, Bliss does not say whether the alliteration of (4) and (8) is “accidental” or what he calls “ornamental” or “non-functional” (*Metre of Beowulf* 12).⁵

Bliss found “ornamental” or “non-functional” alliteration when he analysed group (3). While the frequency of the occurrence of “accidental” alliteration is about one in twelve, that of alliterating finite verbs is about three in four (*Metre of Beowulf* 12). This occurrence is indeed far too frequent to be accidental, as Bliss claims. He explains the difference between “accidental” and “ornamental” or “non-functional” alliteration thus:

‘Accidental’ alliteration is only to be assumed where the word concerned is so insignificant that its participation in the alliteration might reasonably escape the notice of the poet. However, even if ‘accidental’ alliteration is improbable, there remains the possibility of ‘ornamental’ or ‘non-functional’ alliteration; that is to say, a word whose stress is not significant in the metrical pattern may be made to alliterate by the poet as a work of supererogation. (*Metre of Beowulf* 23)

Since in group (3) the finite verb is placed in the normal position for a particle, Bliss leaves room for consideration of whether it is “accidental” alliteration or not, and then suggests the possibility of “ornamental” or “non-functional” alliteration (*Metre of Beowulf* 12).⁶ In group

² *Beowulf* 518a for *hæfde*, 3096a for *bæd*.

³ Bliss counts 65 examples of group (1) which all bear stress and alliterate, out of the 33 examples of group (2) in which 31 alliterate.

⁴ *Beowulf* 1600a for *com*, 1727b for *ah*. Bliss counts 75 examples of group (4).

⁵ He construes some auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries as making accidental alliteration because the proportion of their alliterations is too small (17.6%) (*Metre of Beowulf* 21-3).

⁶ Bliss counts 83 examples of group (3), the finite verb alliterates in 64.

(5), the finite verb alliterates in slightly over half the total instances, and all the alliteration is found in verbs without stress (*Metre of Beowulf* 14).⁷ Following Kuhn’s “Law of Particles (*Satzpartikelgesetz*)” (*Metre of Beowulf* 15)⁸, Bliss does not treat the verb of (5) as a stressed element in these verses; moreover, he points out that in many cases a stress on the particle will produce an impossible metrical pattern, so he treats them as a non-functional alliteration that is not stressed (*Metre of Beowulf* 15-17).⁹ In group (6), Bliss claims that none of the finite verbs need to be stressed because when the verb is the last particle but two before the stressed element, the alliteration is non-functional (*Metre of Beowulf* 18).¹⁰

With one exception¹¹ all the verses in group (7) are b-verses, and all the finite verbs alliterate but one¹²; however, they are not stressed. Like group (5), the finite verb of (9) is stressed only when the metre absolutely requires it; five verses of (9), in which the verb alliterates, have double alliteration, and Bliss assumes that it is non-functional (*Metre of Beowulf* 20).¹³

3. Momma’s Study (1996)

One problem appears in Bliss’s treatment of alliterating finite verbs: he does not explain why we cannot construe as a stressed component a finite verb that alliterates and precedes one alliterating word (i.e., in a double alliterating verse), such as:

geaf him ða mid Geatum (*Beowulf*, 2623a)
 [gave (war-gears to) him then among Geatas]

in his group (6). Applying Momma’s scansion, neither “ $_ x x x _ x$ ” with metrical stress on the finite verb *geaf*, nor “ $x x x x _ x$ ” without metrical stress on *geaf* can be rejected on structural

⁷ Bliss counts 105 examples of group (5), the finite verb alliterates in 57.

⁸ He quotes Kuhn (1933, 9): “if there are several particles, they must not be distributed between both the possible positions [i.e. before and after the first stressed element]; nor may they be placed before the second stressed element if the first is preceded by a proclitic or an unstressed prefix.”

⁹ In group (5), he treats the particle *þa* as a stressed element while the finite verb in the same verse containing *þa* is not stressed.

¹⁰ Bliss counts nine examples in group (6), in six of which the finite verb alliterates.

¹¹ *Beowulf* 731a for *mynte* (*Metre of Beowulf* 19).

¹² *Beowulf* 2252b for *nah* (*Metre of Beowulf* 19).

¹³ He counts ten examples in group (9); the finite verb alliterates in seven, and the instances of non-functional alliteration are five (338a, 442a, 2057a, 2172a, 2430a).

evidence: the first one has double alliteration and two particles, while the second has single alliteration and three particles.¹⁴

In her criticism of alliterating finite verbs in clause-initial a-verses, Momma focuses on different syntactic behaviours between Bliss's binary classification of auxiliaries (and quasi-auxiliaries) and non-auxiliaries. She collects instances in which the finite verb (auxiliary and non-auxiliary) precedes a pronominal *Satzpartikeln* or follows it. The result is that "the greater the semantic significance of the verb, the stronger its tendency to precede pronominal *Satzpartikeln*;" by contrast, "those verbs that have the strongest tendency to follow pronominal *Satzpartikeln* have the least semantic significance" ("Metrical Stress on Alliterating Finite Verbs" 187).¹⁵

Momma infers that this difference, motivated by semantic significance, seems to have a pragmatic function. Non-auxiliaries that have relatively full semantic significance and tend to be confused with stressed elements are likely to be placed before pronominal *Satzpartikeln* so that they are less likely to be mistaken for stressed elements. However, auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries that have relatively little semantic significance can be placed not only before pronominal *Satzpartikeln* but also after them. This is because they are not likely to be mistaken for unstressed elements, even when following pronominal *Satzpartikeln* ("Metrical Stress on Alliterating Finite Verbs" 191-92).

Although Momma claims that modern metrists seem to fail in determining the metrical status of the finite verb in double alliterating clause-initial a-verses as stressed or unstressed ("Metrical Stress on Alliterating Finite Verbs" 194), the assumption of the pragmatic function is helpful to examine the finite verb in double alliterating verses.

4. Relation between Stressed Finite Verb and Metrical Pattern

On the problem of the alliterating finite verb in double alliterating verses, both Bliss and Momma appear to disregard the issue of whether the metrical stress must correspond with alliteration. Can it become an impossible or ambiguous metrical pattern when a finite verb participating in double alliteration is alliterated and stressed at the same time?

¹⁴ "/" stands for stressed syllable; "x" stands for unstressed syllable. Underlining signifies alliteration ("Metrical Stress on Alliterating Finite Verbs" 187).

¹⁵ Unlike Bliss, Momma indicates that auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries show the tendency to occur as metrically unstressed elements to different degrees.

I survey these alliterating pairs that include finite verbs participating in double alliteration from five poems: *Panther*, *Whale*, *Partridge*, *Phoenix* and *Dream of the Rood* (Table 1). I chose these poems because *Panther*, *Whale*, *Partridge* and *Phoenix* are all contained in the same manuscript, and *Dream of the Rood* has a peculiarity of its length of verses. Several verses bear more than one proclitic or particle other than a finite verb; they are simplified; for instance, these two verses from *Whale* and *Panther* are classified into [st. pa.] and [pa. st.]:

ond on teosu tyhtaþ (*Whale*, 34a)¹⁶

[and in injury stretches]

swifeð on swefote (*Panther*, 39a)

[wends into slumber]

Table 1 Classification of Finite Verbs in Double Alliteration¹⁷

Pattern	<i>Panther</i>	<i>Whale</i>	<i>Partridge</i>	<i>Phoenix</i>	<i>Dream of the Rood</i>
[<u>st.</u> pa.]	1 (20%) ¹⁸	4 (50%) ¹⁹	—	52 (51.4%) ²⁰	2 (7.6%) ²¹
[pa. <u>st.</u>]	3 (60%) ²²	4 (50%) ²³	—	34 (33.6%) ²⁴	10 (38.4%) ²⁵
[<u>st.</u> st. pa.]	1 (20%) ²⁶	—	—	1 (0.9%) ²⁷	—
[<u>st.</u> pa. pa.]	—	—	—	1 (0.9%) ²⁸	—

¹⁶ I rely on the edition of Krapp and Dobbie when I do scansion of *Panther*, *Whale*, *Partridge* and *Phoenix*, and that of Marsden when I scan *Dream of the Rood*.

¹⁷ St. stands for stressed element; pa. stands for particle. Underline signifies alliteration.

¹⁸ 64a.

¹⁹ 22a, 26a, 34a, 44a.

²⁰ 22a, 23a, 32a, 41a, 67a, 70a, 85a, 99a, 105a, 110a, 112a, 121a, 161a, 162a, 177a, 185a, 210a, 211a, 213a, 222a, 263a, 276a, 282a, 283a, 322a, 333a, 342a, 343a, 344a, 410a, 448a, 462a, 488a, 501a, 503a, 507a, 537a, 545a, 561a, 567a, 575a, 584a, 592a, 599a, 605a, 609a, 616a, 617a, 620a, 633a, 634a, 636a.

²¹ 89a, 118a.

²² 39a, 51a, 61a.

²³ 2a, 15a, 35a, 57a.

²⁴ 27a, 74a, 82a, 90a, 107a, 127a, 129a, 159a, 160a, 168a, 181a, 232a, 237a, 247a, 255a, 286a, 337a, 338a, 389a, 391a, 397a, 428a, 444a, 467a, 484a, 519a, 526a, 532a, 548a, 568a, 571a, 604a, 618a, 635a.

²⁵ 25a, 31a, 63a, 71a, 83a, 85a, 97a, 122a, 135a, 155a.

²⁶ 63a.

²⁷ 218a.

²⁸ 216a.

[pa. pa.]	—	—	—	3 (2.9%) ²⁹	2 (7.6%) ³⁰
[pa. pa. st.]	—	—	—	—	1 (3.8%) ³¹
[pa. st. st.]	—	—	—	10 (9.9%) ³²	10 (38.4%) ³³
[pa. st. pa.]	—	—	—	—	1 (3.8%) ³⁴

Finite verbs in pattern [st. pa.] are inevitably stressed because a verse is unlikely to conclude with two metrically unstressed components. Patterns [pa. st.] and [pa. pa.] raise an issue whether the metrical stress corresponds with an alliterating finite verb (in the case of [pa. pa.], the first finite verb); on the other hand, when they correspond, they do not evince an impossible or ambiguous metrical rhythm patterns.

Several verses will become ambiguous in their metrical pattern because of an extra stressed element or particle: pattern [st. st. pa.], [st. pa. pa.], [pa. pa. st.], [pa. st. st.] and [pa. st. pa.]. The following is an example of pattern [st. st. pa.]:

Preo niht þolade (*Panther*, 63a)
[three nights endured]

If *niht* bears a secondary stress, the metrical pattern will be heavy verse of type A.³⁵ But demoting the stressed element *niht* to a secondary stress might cause an argument. The instance of pattern [st. pa. pa.] is thus:

Bæl bið onæled (*Phoenix*, 216a)
[Funeral-pyre is inflamed]

This case is more difficult to interpret. If *onæled* is composed of an unstressed component and a secondary stress that is resolved, it will be type DII³⁶. But this is inconsistent with more

²⁹ 124a, 140a, 172a.

³⁰ 2a, 11a.

³¹ 48a.

³² 123a, 155a, 208a, 269a, 326a, 347a, 497a, 580a, 615a, 630a.

³³ 32a, 33a, 42a, 46a, 56a, 61a, 64a, 67a, 75a, 133a.

³⁴ 39a.

³⁵ In regard to classification of metrical rhythms, see Terasawa, 27-48. His classification is based on Sievers's work with some modification. For instance, Type D2 in his notation is called Type D4 in Sievers's study, and the minor variants of Type D1 are classified into Type D2 and D3 by Sievers.

³⁶ DI and DII stand for D1 and D2 respectively (Terasawa, 27-48).

semantic significance of *onæled* than that of *bið*. Pattern [pa. pa. st.] is a long verse that shows such an inconsistency:

Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere (*Dream of the Rood*, 48a)
[mocked they both together]

This verse can be assumed to be hypermetric; therefore, *ætgædere* might bear a full stress. Although it is possibly type A if the alliterating word *butu* is not stressed, anacrusis are unlikely to be placed on this position unless they are put before the first lift of a double alliterating verse. Pattern [pa. pa. st.] is slightly more ambiguous than the other patterns, especially in *Phoenix* and *Dream of the Rood*:

fareð feþrum snell (*Phoenix*, 123a)
[goes (with) wings swift]
Bæron me ðær beornas on eaxlum (*Dream of the Rood*, 32a)
[carried me then men on shoulders]

Here again, the second example is assumed to be hypermetric; *eaxlum* is acceptable to bear a full stress. Lastly, an instance of pattern [pa. st. pa.] is:

Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð (*Dream of the Rood*, 39a)
[Stripped himself then young hero]

If the finite verb *hæleð* is composed of two unstressed components, it will be an impossible metrical pattern. If the first element of *hæleð* bears a secondary stress, this verse will be construed as type DI. Therefore, to classify these patterns into one of several rhythmic types, one needs to demote a non-alliterating stressed element to a secondary stress. However, in a hypermetric verse, this type of stress supposed to be acceptable.

5. Conclusion: Conceivable Function of Double Alliteration

The issue of whether a finite verb in a verse should be stressed was dependent on its position in a verse and the composition of the verse. Especially in a double alliterating verse, an alliterating finite verb is treated as “ornamental” or “accidental”. Nevertheless, when an alliterating finite verb in a double alliterating verse is invariably stressed, most verses are not impossible or ambiguous in their rhythmic pattern; only 17.6 percent of them are ambiguous. There is room for further consideration of the effect of double alliteration upon stressed positions; in other words, the rhythmic pattern in a verse.

In further studies, I will examine cases in which adverbs, pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions are alliterating words and participate in double alliteration; additionally, I will explore their rhythmic patterns. If the percentage of one of the rhythmic types is large, I would like to clarify the reason and its relation to the function of double alliteration.

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