

BRIT. LIT.

VOLUME 10

POETRY WORKBOOK

POETRY WORKBOOK

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LOGOS PRESS
MOSCOW • IDAHO

Published by Logos Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800.488.2034 | www.logospressonline.com

Rebekah Merkle, ed., *Brit Lit, Vol. 10: Poetry Workbook*
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Cover and interior design by Rebekah Merkle.
Printed in the United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is forthcoming.

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Old English Memorization

Before you take the Old English test, you need to have the following passage from Beowulf memorized. Work on it a bit every day and you'll be fine.

Throughout this year, poetry memorization is cumulative, so you'll need to know this for every test the rest of the year.

Sovereign king, do not sorrow— it seems better to me
 To finish the feud as friends wrecking vengeance
 Than sorrow in silence. We simply decide
 To abide and endure and exert valor always,
 To find dignity in death. When his days are all done,
 The worthiest warrior is well-remembered.

You will also be memorizing the very beginning of Beowulf in its original Anglo-Saxon. You will need to be able to recite this orally, you do not need to be able to spell it. Refer to the Beowulf audio file at www.logospressonline.com/BritLit for help with pronunciation.

Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum,
 þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
 Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum . . .

Anglo-Saxon Kennings

*The Anglo-Saxons often used a poetic device known as the kenning. A **kenning** is a figurative, usually compound expression which is used in place of a name or noun.*

A classic example of a kenning that is found throughout Beowulf is “Whale-Road,” which stands in for “the sea.” There are plenty of others, so as you make your way through Beowulf, pay attention to the kennings and when you see a good one, write it down on these pages. (But don’t make the mistake of thinking that if it has a hyphen it is therefore necessarily a kenning. Sometimes a hyphen is just a hyphen.)

Original Kennings

On these pages, come up with some kennings of your own. Notice how the Saxon kennings work—they involve looking at things from a different angle and helping the reader to see the object in a new and unusual way. So do your best to be creative and original. Don't, for instance, write "light-dots" for stars. That would be dumb. Here we are aiming for Not Dumb. An ideal kenning is one which makes you stop for a second, and then say, "Oh, that's cool. I never thought of it like that before." For instance, the Saxon kenning "bone-house" for "body" makes you stop and think of your body in a slightly different way—and that is what makes a great kenning.

Write at least eight kennings today: Begin by coming up one kenning each for the following words: Storm, Forest, Star. Then come up with five more completely on your own. Continue to add more as (and if) you think of them.

Caedmon's Hymn

This poem is another example of the way the Saxons loved to focus on God as creator. Grendel hated hearing the song of creation going on in the mead hall—and this is another Saxon mead hall creation song.

The story of Caedmon was recorded by the Venerable Bede in the 8th century, but Caedmon himself lived in the 7th century at Whitby Abbey, a now ruined Benedictine monastery which looks out over the North Sea. One evening, while the monks were feasting, singing, and playing the harp, Caedmon (who was a shepherd) had to sneak out in embarrassment because he knew no songs. He went out to sleep with the animals—and had a dream in which he was taught a song. He still remembered the miraculous song when he woke up, and below is the result. He went on to become famed as a poet—and is the earliest English poet whose name is known. Note the use of “middle earth”—obviously picked up by Tolkien. Also note the alliteration (which is always hard to capture exactly in translation).

Now we must praise the Protector of the heavenly kingdom,
 the might of the Measurer and His mind's purpose,
 the work of the Father of Glory, as He for each of the wonders,
 the eternal Lord, established a beginning.
 He shaped first for the sons of the earth,
 heaven as a roof, the Holy Maker;
 then the middle earth, mankind's Guardian,
 the eternal Lord, made afterwards,
 solid ground for men, the almighty Lord.

Caesura and Alliteration

Now we're going to learn how a Saxon line of poetry was set up, but before galloping into it, let's stop, drop, and make sure we know some of the basics.

The first important thing is to understand what a ***stressed syllable*** is. Presumably we're on solid ground as far as knowing what a syllable is—if you're lost on that point, take a time out and do some research. But what is the difference between a stressed and an unstressed syllable? That all comes down to the way we actually SAY the word.

Take, for instance, the word *because*. Do you say it, “BE-cause” or do you say it, “be-CAUSE”? Try it both ways and decide which one sounds normal. (I'm hoping you decided on option two.) Do you hear the difference between them? One way sounds completely normal, and the other way just sounds silly. In the word *because* the second syllable is the stressed syllable. That simply means it's the syllable you naturally emphasize when you pronounce the word.

Now look at *Caedmon's Hymn* at left. Do you see how each line is broken in half, leaving a gap in the middle? That gap is called a ***caesura***, which is a word you have to know, so don't forget it. You may have noticed that there is also a caesura in the middle of every line in *Beowulf*.

The way a Saxon line of poetry was set up, there were 2 stressed syllables before the caesura and 2 stressed syllables after. There was no limit on the total number of syllables in a line—but there could only be 4 stressed syllables total.

Another feature of Saxon poetry is that instead of rhyming, the way we tend to do in modern poetry, the Saxons alliterated.

Rhyming is what happens when the final sound of two words match: *nation* and *station*.

Alliteration is what happens when the first sound of two words match: *nation* and *now*.

Alliteration tends to be more subtle than rhyming. If someone

accidentally rhymes when they're speaking, everyone notices, the person laughs sheepishly, and says, "Whoops. Didn't mean to rhyme that." But unless alliteration is heavily exaggerated we tend to not hear it as much. An exaggerated example would be, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." A more everyday sort of example would be, "I never noticed before how many needles are in that pincushion."

It can still be a very effective poetic device—it unites a line and makes it sound more smooth. It works well in prose too, since it doesn't jump out at people.

Assignment: Go through *Caedmon's Hymn* on page 16, and mark the alliteration in every line.

Finnsburg Fragment

You have just read in Beowulf the song that the minstrel sang in the mead hall, telling the story of the fight at Finnsburg. In Beowulf it is known as “The Finnsburg Episode,” but this is another independent version of the same story which has survived and is known as the Finnsburg Fragment.

Only a portion of this poem remains (thus the “fragment” in the name), but there are some very notable differences between this particular telling of the story and the Beowulf version. In this poem, we are given the story of a glorious and heroic battle. The author of Beowulf, however, brings in other elements which aren’t mentioned in this version at all—namely, the woman.

In the story the minstrel sang in Beowulf, we are shown the tragedy of this story as seen through the eyes of the woman who lost everything. She was a peaceweaver, and it turned out to be an ineffective peaceweaving. (The author of Beowulf seems to go out of his way several times to stress that peaceweaving was very frequently ineffective.) The clan of this woman’s father and the clan of her husband ended up fighting, and she lost everyone she cared about on both sides. We are meant to feel the tragedy of the situation, and see the horrible and seemingly senseless consequences of the blood feud.

In the Finnsburg Fragment, we hear only of a glorious battle. As you read through this, you’ll notice a complete absence of the woman whom we left weeping at the pyre back in Beowulf.

‘The gables are not burning.’

Then the king, a novice in battle, said:

‘This is no dawn from the east, no dragon
flies here, the gables of the hall are not burning,
but men are making an attack. Birds of battle screech,
the grey wolf howls, spears rattle,
shield answers shaft. The wandering moon gleams
under the clouds; evil deeds will now
be done, bringing grief to this people.

But rouse yourself now, my warriors!
Grasp your shields, steel yourselves,
fight at the front and be brave!’
Then many a thegn, laden in gold, buckled his sword-belt.
Then the stout warriors, Sigferth and Eaha,
went to one door and unsheathed their swords;
Ordlaf and Guthlaf went to guard the other,
and Hengest himself followed in their footsteps.
When he saw this, Guthere said to Garulf
that he would be unwise to go to the hall doors
in the first rush, risking his precious life,
for fearless Sigferth was set upon his death.
But that daring man drowned the other voices
and demanded openly who held the door.
‘I am Sigferth, a prince of the Secgan
and a well-known warrior; I’ve braved many trials,
tough combats. Even now it is decreed
for you what you can expect of me here.’
Then the din of battle broke out in the hall;
the hollow shield called for men’s hands,
helmets burst; the hall floor boomed.
Then Garulf, son of Guthlaf, gave his life
in the fight, first of all the warriors
living in that land, and many heroes fell around him,
the corpses of brave men. The raven wheeled,
dusky, dark brown. The gleaming swords so shone
it seemed as if all Finnesburh were in flames.
I have never heard of sixty warriors
who bore themselves more bravely in the fight
and never did retainers better repay
glowing mead than those men repaid Hnæf.
They fought for five days and not one of the followers

fell, but they held the doors firmly.
Then Guthere withdrew, a wounded man;
he said that his armour was almost useless,
his corselet broken, his helmet burst open.
The guardian of those people asked him at once
how well the warriors had survived their wounds
or which of the young men . . .

Writing a Saxon Line

Part 1

Now you're going to take a stab at writing a few lines of poetry in the Saxon style. It's nowhere near as easy as it seems. The first thing to work on is the counting of accented (or "stressed") syllables. In Saxon poetry there are only four accented syllables per line, two on either side of the caesura. For the following examples, mark every accented syllable, and in the space at the right, write down how many accented syllables there were, out of how many total syllables there were. Some of these lines are correct, and some are not—see if you can tell which ones are which. Read the line naturally and then mark where the stresses naturally fall.

Example: Round the wall were sprigs of ivy.

4/8

From in the shadows there were sounds of buckets. _____

Before coming home again, I ran to the store. _____

The time that we spent there was horribly unfortunate. _____

And then there was that other girl who cheated. _____

I have to say that food was good. _____

Hopefully you will have noticed that the number of stressed syllables in a line has nothing to do with the total number of syllables. Every combination of words is going to turn out completely differently as far as these numbers go.

Look at your answers. All of the ones that had 4 stressed syllables would be perfectly appropriate lines to put into a Saxon poem, even though some had 8 total syllables and some had 14. The only thing you care about in Saxon poetry is the number of stresses in a line. In other words, that first number you wrote down is the number you care about—the second number is completely irrelevant.

Now you're going to write some lines of your own—each with 4 stressed syllables. Make sure that you vary how many total syllables you put in each one. If it turns out at the end that you've written every line with 4 stresses out of 8 total, go back and change some. You don't want to end up with every line being singsongy. At the end of the line, mark how many stresses there are out of how many total. Write at least six lines.

Writing a Saxon Line Part 2

Now that you have figured out how many stresses you need per line, we need to sort out the alliteration. As was mentioned earlier, Saxon poetry does not rhyme, it alliterates. There are some very specific rules for how the alliteration works, so buckle up and pay attention.

We know that there are four stressed syllables in each line. The third stressed syllable (the one after the caesura) must alliterate with the first or the second stressed syllable, or both. The fourth doesn't matter.

Example: Kings had courage then, the kings of all tribes.

The underlined words are the stressed syllables—two on either side of the caesura. The circled words show the alliteration. (Notice that alliteration is based on the sound of the letter, not the letter itself. . . a hard C alliterates with a K.) In this example, the third stressed syllable alliterates with both the first and the second—but it would also have been ok if it had only alliterated with one or the other. So, if the line had been changed to this it would still have worked:

Rulers had courage then, the kings of all tribes.

Mark up the lines on the facing page, underlining the stressed syllables and circling the alliteration. Then decide if they are correct or incorrect. If they are incorrect, write what's wrong with them.

He rose and in rising, he wrecked all his foes.

Correct? If not, why not?

He fought in the front and he ran towards the foe.

Correct? If not, why not?

The whale-road was wide but his warriors still crossed it.

Correct? If not, why not?

Riddles

The Saxons greatly enjoyed riddles. The Exeter Book is a tenth century collection of Saxon poetry which contains, among other things, nearly 100 riddles. Many of them are religious, and others are obscene, some are obvious and easy, while others are quite difficult to solve. Obviously, Tolkien borrowed from this genre in the The Hobbit, as riddling becomes a major plot point in the story.

There are several categories of riddle, but the one we're going to focus on is called a Neck Riddle. This is the kind of riddle which, if solved, will save your neck! This means that something important (like your life) is riding on your answer. Neck Riddles also tend to be much more difficult, and usually require some sort of special knowledge in order to solve them—basically you “had to have been there.” This also tends to make them feel unfair.

One example of a Neck Riddle would be Sampson's famous riddle which he posed to the Philistines in Judges 14:14. Something important hung in the balance, but it also required inside knowledge in order to solve it. Another example would be Bilbo's riddle, “What have I got in my pocket?” In both of these cases, the riddlers were doing something more than just telling a joke—the outcome of the riddle was significant. These riddles are also both quite impossible to solve without additional information.