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## The alliterating verb in Beowulf 2717b seah on enta geweorc (Part 1)

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# The alliterating verb in *Beowulf* 2717b *seah on enta geweorc*\*

## Part I

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### Abstract

In Old English *Beowulf*, the finite verb in verse 2717b *seah on enta geweorc* takes precedence over two nouns in alliteration. This verse has been considered a serious violation of the so-called Sievers's Rule of Precedence, according to which finite verbs do not take precedence over nominals in alliteration (e.g. Bliss 1967; Stanley 1975; Donoghue 1987). However, the effect of Sievers's Rule of Precedence, namely, the tendency for verbs to receive weaker stress than nominals, is not something peculiar to Germanic alliterative verse but is also observed in Present-day English (Cruttenden 1997; Ladd 2008; Calhoun 2010). The rule, therefore, reflects natural prosody and there is no evidence that it is obeyed without exception in verse composition. Further, although the verb 'to see' generally does not bear a high semantic load (Bolinger 1986, 1989), finite lexical verbs in contrast to auxiliaries show a certain amount of stress in their metrical behavior. Moreover, the alliterating verb in 2717b occurs in clause-initial position where finite verbs show a higher ratio of alliteration than in other positions in the clause (Orton 1985; Y. Suzuki 2008). Lastly, *enta geweorc*, which cooccurs with the alliterating verb in 2717b, as a formulaic expression rephrased elsewhere may not be strongly stressed. The unusual alliterative pattern in *Beowulf* 2717b, therefore, can be attributed to natural prosody and does not provide motivation for emendation as Donoghue (1987) proposes.

**Keywords:** finite verb stress, Sievers's Rule of Precedence, Germanic alliterative verse, Old English, *Beowulf*

### 1. Introduction

In Germanic alliterative verse, finite verbs do not in general take precedence over nouns in alliteration and this generalization is occasionally referred to as Sievers's Rule of Precedence (Rieger 1876: 24-25; Sievers 1885, 1893: §24). However, there are a small number of verses in Old English *Beowulf* where the finite verb alliterates in precedence to a nominal. In addition, there is one verse, i.e. 2717b given in (1), that consists of an alliterating finite verb and two

non-alliterating nouns and this verse has drawn scholars' attention due to its unusual alliterative pattern (Bliss 1967: §16; Stanley 1975: 307-321; Cosmos 1976: 315-316; Orton 1985: 155-157; Donoghue 1987: 37; Lucas 1987: 167; Fulk et al. 2008: 255, 334-335).<sup>1</sup>

- (1)    gesæt     on sēsse;        seah on énta    gewèorc,        2717  
          sat-down on seat            saw on giants work  
          '...sat on a seat; he looked on the work of giants'

Since the alliterating consonant in this line is *s* as indicated by the underline, it is the verb that alliterates in the second verse and neither of the two nouns that follow the verb.

This paper shows that the alliteration on the finite verb in verse 2717b above is reasonable in that the finite verb involved is a clause-initial lexical verb followed by a formulaic expression with a low semantic load. Part I consists of the first four sections including the introduction. In what follows, section 2 illustrates Sievers's Rule of Precedence with examples from *Beowulf* and critically evaluates previous accounts for the unique alliterative pattern. Section 3 shows that the so-called Sievers's Rule of Precedence reflects natural prosody with parallels from Present-day English and discusses factors that determine stress on finite verbs in *Beowulf*. Section 4 examines alliterative patterns of other verses that involve a finite form of a lexical verb and one or two nominals. In Part II, section 5 discusses verses in *Beowulf* where other weakly stressable words such as pronouns and demonstratives take precedence over nominals in alliteration. Section 6 examines the metrical behavior of the phrase *énta geweorc*, the context in which 2717b occurs, and other relevant issues associated with 2717b. Section 7 gives conclusions and is followed by the Appendix of the list of verses that violate Sievers's Rule of Precedence.

## 2. The problem of *Beo* 2717b and the so-called 'Sievers's Rule of Precedence'

As already noted, finite verbs tend to receive weaker metrical stress than other content words, i.e. nouns, adjectives, deadjectival adverbs, and non-finite verbs, which are referred to as nominals below (cf. Sievers 1893: §24; Donoghue 1987: 9; Fulk 1991: 182 fn. 23; Lucas 1987: 159; Harkness 1991: 20-21; S. Suzuki 1996: 283-284). This tendency is occasionally referred to as Sievers's Rule of Precedence although, prior to Sievers, Rieger (1876: 24-25) noted this tendency. Thus, when there is a finite verb and one or more nominals in a verse, it is usually

the nominal that alliterates, as in 715b in (2a), 397a in (4a), and 926b and 2014b in (5a), or both the verb and the nominal that alliterate, as in 742a in (3a) and 1557a in (5a).

(2) a. goldsele gumena gearwost **wisse** 715  
gold-hall men most-certainly knew  
'he could see most clearly the treasure-house of men'

b. wunde wælbleate; **wisse** hē gearwe 2725  
wound mortal knew he well  
'his mortal hurts. He knew well'

(3) a. **bāt** hānlocan, blōd ēdrum dranc, 742  
cut bone-locker blood veins drank  
'...bit into his bone-locks, drank the blood from his veins'

b. brūn on bāne, **bāt** unswīðor 2578  
bright on bone cut less-strongly  
'bright on the bone, bit less surely'

(4) a. ~~lætað~~ hildebord hēr onbidan, 397  
let battle-shields here wait  
'let your war-shields await here'

b. Hwīlum hē on lufan ~~læteð~~ hworfan 1728  
at-times he in love lets turn  
'At times He lets...move in delight'

(5) a. stōd on stapole, **geseah** stēapne hrōf 926  
stood on steps saw high roof  
'he had taken his stand on the steps, looked at the high roof'

Weorod wæs on wynne; **ne seah** ic wīdan feorh 2014  
company was in joy not saw I extended life

‘The company was in joy: I have not seen in the time of my life...’

**Geseah** ðā on searwum      sigeēadig      bil,      1557  
 saw then in armor      victory-blessed blade  
 ‘Then he saw among the armor a victory-blessed blade’

- b. sec s̅arigferð      **seah** on unlēofe:      2863  
 man sad-at-heart      looked on not-loved  
 ‘a man sad at heart looked on the unloved ones’

In contrast, the alliterative pattern that involves only the verb but not the nominal(s) is rare, as in (2b), (3b), (4b), and (5b) as well as (1) above.

There are twenty-three verses in *Beowulf* including 2725b, 2578b, 1728b, and 2863b just given where the finite verb takes precedence over one noun or nominal in alliteration. Also, as already stated, there is only one verse in *Beowulf*, i.e. 2717b, where the verb alliterates at the cost of the following two nouns. For the list of verses that violate Sievers’s Rule of Precedence, see the Appendix in Part II.

Several accounts have been presented for the unusual alliterative pattern of 2717b. Campbell (1962: 16-17) attributed it to some earlier different type of texts i.e. lay. However, Campbell’s assumption not only lacks evidence but also begs the question as to why alliteration of finite verbs is allowed in lays (also Stanley 1975: 309; Orton 1985: 156).

Orton (1985: 155-157) observed that initial verbs in ‘appositional’ a-verses, i.e. verbs that share the same subject with the directly preceding verb in the previous line, typically alliterate (also Bliss 1967; Fulk et al. 2008: 334). In fact, as Y. Suzuki (2008: 100-114) shows, clause-initial verbs alliterate more often than verbs in other positions in *Beowulf* and this alliterative pattern is likely to reflect natural prosody. Orton’s formulation, however, suggests that the alliteration on the verb is a metrical device.

On the other hand, according to Cosmos (1976: 315-316), alliteration on the verb reflects emphasis on the verb (also Sievers 1893: §24.3). The interpretation of the context, however, is not compelling, which will be discussed in section 6 in Part II.

Further, due to the unusual metrical pattern in addition to the alliterative pattern, Donoghue (1987: 36-40) proposed emendation of the problematical sequence of a finite verb and a preposition into an infinitive, i.e. *seohon* (= \**seohan* > *sēon*) in place of *seah on*, because

infinitives have been claimed to be more stressable than finite verbs (Donoghue 1987: 207 fn.21). However, as Hutcheson (1995: 166 fn.13) pointed out, positing the disyllabic infinitive puts the date of composition earlier than what is commonly asserted. In fact, forms that antedate loss of intervocalic *-h-* and the subsequent contraction are otherwise unknown in *Beowulf*. One might argue that the metrical device of ‘decontraction’, i.e. interpretation of one contracted syllable as a sequence of stressed and unstressed positions, supplies evidence for the proposed emendation. However, this device presupposes that verse was composed in accordance with particular metrical types, which itself requires justification and is criticized by Touster (1954) and Y. Suzuki (2006-7: II 39-45) although accepted by many such as Amos (1980: 40-63), Hutcheson (1995: 40-45), and Fulk (1992: 92-121). Thus, due to lack of attestation of uncontracted infinitives and the controversial status of decontraction, it is reasonable to assume that forms that antedate loss of intervocalic *h* and the subsequent contraction, although etymologically justified, are too early to be reflected in the poem. In other words, in terms of word form, Donoghue’s emendation is not well founded. Moreover, in terms of alliteration, Donoghue’s emendation is no better because, as well as finite lexical verbs, infinitives in general do not take precedence in alliteration over nouns as will be shown in section 4 below. Additional motivations for emendation are the unique metrical type and the use of subjunctive mood in the verb of the subordinate clause. These issues will be taken up in section 6 in Part II where the given verse is discussed in context.

### 3. Stress on finite verbs

The so-called Sievers’s Rule of Precedence implies that finite verbs as a class are less stressable than nominals. As another observation with the same implication, a number of clause-initial lexical verbs as well as auxiliaries are metrically unstressed (Bliss 1967; Y. Suzuki 2008: 102), e.g. *geseah* in 926b in (5a), although nouns are stressed even in clause-initial position. Furthermore, the fourth lift, which is the weakest among the four lifts in that it never alliterates, is typically filled by a finite verb, e.g. *wisse* in (2a) (Harkness 1991: 96; Y. Suzuki 2006-7: III 42).

Weaker stress on verbs than on nouns, however, is not something peculiar to early Germanic poetry. In fact, the tendency that verbs are less strongly stressed than nouns reflects natural prosody and applies to Present-day English and other modern languages. Thus, in Present-day English, while as a rule the last content word is a nucleus, it is typically the noun

preceding the clause-final verb that bears the nuclear stress rather than the verb (Schmerling 1976: 81-85; Cruttenden 1997: 141-142; Wells 2006: 170-172; Ladd 2008: 244-251; Calhoun 2010: 13-14). For example, in (6) words in bold bears nuclear stress, i.e. the nominal compound in the first example or the noun in the others instead of the clause-final or close-to-final verb.

- (6)      The **coffee** machine broke.  
           I have a **book** to read.  
           I wonder where **Mary** went.  
           Where's that **salad** I was eating?  
           The **computer** blew up.

As discussed by earlier studies on intonation and sentence stress in Present-day English, the contrast is typically between nouns and verbs rather than finite verbs alone, but may appear to be more broadly between arguments and predicates including adjectives as well as verbs.

There are also several types of sentences where a verb is the nucleus instead (Gussenhoven 1983; Faber 1987; Ladd 2008: 245). Needless to say, when the verb has more semantic weight than the noun, the verb bears stronger stress than the noun. Alternatively, whether or not the verb belongs to old or new information does affect the stress on the verb. For example, in the sentences in (7) the nuclear stress is not on the clause-final noun of low semantic content but on the verb that precedes the noun as indicated in bold (Wells 2006: 150-151; Ladd 2008: 238).

- (7)      What are you going to **tell** people?  
           I can't **stand** that woman. (= I can't **stand** her.)

The same applies to the semantic content of verbs. As for the verb 'to see', Bolinger (1986: 124-125; 1989: 239-241) characterizes it as a 'routine' verb, which is generally destressed in contrast to verbs with more semantic content that are normally stressed. Compare the pair of sentences in (8) with unstressed *saw* and stressed *spotted*.

- (8)      What happened? — Tómmy **saw** a béar!  
                                   Tómmy **spótted** a béar!

While Bolinger discusses Present-day English, the same obviously applies to Old English as will be discussed shortly.

On the other hand, there are also cases where the nucleus on the clause-final verb is apparently not determined by the semantic weight. For example, in (9) the nuclear stress is on the clause-final verb in bold.

- (9) The professor **swore**.  
Hope **faded**.

There have been accounts as to the contrast between (6), where the noun is the nucleus, and (9), where the verb instead is the nucleus. According to Ladd (2008: 245), the first example in (9) has a human agent as the subject and the second example is figurative with the abstract entity as the subject (also Faber 1987: 345, 343). On the other hand, Calhoun (2010: 13-14) assumes that nucleus is determined by the semantic relationship between the verb and the noun phrase: the intransitive verbs in (6) are unaccusative and thus the subject, which is not the agent, is semantically the object while the stress pattern in (9) is productive.

The above facts show that, although there are examples to the contrary as given in (9), verbs tend to be less stressed than nouns unless they have more semantic weight than nouns. Further, given the facts about the sentence stress in Present-day English as has been discussed, the so-called Sievers's Rule of Precedence is likely to reflect natural prosody rather than being an arbitrary metrical convention. As in Present-day English, stress on finite verbs also depends on the semantic weight of the verb and other elements in the same sentence.

Earlier literature on the subject has discussed several factors that determine metrical stress on finite verbs in *Beowulf*. The first factor is the number of syllables of verb forms: longer forms show higher ratio of alliteration than shorter forms (Getty 2002; Y. Suzuki 2008: 90-94). The second factor is the lexical categories: lexical verbs are more stressable than auxiliaries (Cosmos 1976: 311-312; Russom 1991: 132; Getty 2002; Y. Suzuki 2008: 94-97). Auxiliaries refer to verbs that form periphrastic verb forms, i.e. *wesan/bēon* 'to be', *habban* 'to have', *weorðan* 'to be, to become', and pre-modals such as *sculan* 'shall' and *willan* 'will' (Traugott 1992: 186). In fact, finite verbs that take precedence in alliteration over nouns in *Beowulf* are lexical verbs (see the Appendix in Part II). However, there are varying degrees of semantic load and thus of stressability among those verbs. Based on the length and the lexical category, some verbs are likely to receive strong stress and thus take precedence over a



nominal in alliteration such as *weardode* ‘guarded (pret, 3sg)’ in 105b and *fundode* ‘was eager to go (pret, 3sg)’ in 1137b. Some others, however, are not likely to receive strong stress such as *sægde* ‘said (pret, 3sg)’ in 1175a and *seah* ‘saw (pret, 3sg)’ and in fact these forms also occur in a drop in other verses such as *seah* in 2014b in (5a).

In Present-day English the verb ‘to see’ has low semantic weight in general and tends to be destressed as in (8). In Old English as well, perception verbs in general have low ‘communicative dynamism’ according to Cosmos (1976: 314, 318) and thus are not likely to receive strong stress. In *Beowulf* the verb *sēon* or *gesēon* ‘see’ occur forty-seven times according to Fulk et al. (2008: 432). Most forms of *sēon* fill a lift and some an alliterating lift. Of monosyllabic forms, *seah* fills a drop twice such as in 2014b in (5a) and an alliterating lift twice, i.e. 2717b and 2863b in (5b). With a prefix, *geseah* occurs in a drop four times including two A3 verses and fills a non-alliterating lift eight times and an alliterating lift twice (also Cosmos 1976: 315). A present form *gesyhð* fills a non-alliterating lift and an alliterating lift once each. The verb thus may either be stressed or unstressed.

The third factor that governs alliteration of finite verbs is stressability of other elements in the same verse, that is, whether the verb cooccurs with grammatical words or content words (Y. Suzuki 2008: 97-100). In the present context, only verses are under consideration where a finite lexical verb cooccurs with one or more nominals. While both are content words, there are varying degrees of semantic weight as is the case with Present-day English in relation with (7) and (8) above. That is, the verb is more likely to alliterate when it bears more semantic weight and when the nominal in the same verse bears less semantic load. In (10a), for example, *man* is comparable to a pronoun in meaning and this may be the reason for lack of alliteration on the noun.

- (10) a. Mē **man** *sægde*    þæt þū ðē        for *sunu* wolde        1175  
           me man said        that you yourself for son    would  
           ‘They have told me that you would...for your son...’
- b. *mildum* wordum,                    swā sceal **man** dōn.        1172  
           kind    words                    as    should man do  
           ‘with mild words, as a man ought to do.’  
           Also 25b, 1048b, 1398b, 1534b, 1560b, 1876b, 2281a, 3065a

- c. hondgemōta      þær **mon** Hygelāc slōh,      2355  
 hand-meetings      where man Hygelac slew  
 ‘hand-combats where Hygelac was slain’  
 Also 2996a, 3175a

There are thirteen occurrences of *man* and another thirteen with an alternative spelling *mon* in *Beowulf*. Nine of them including those with a pronominal meaning alliterate as in (10b) while only three of *mon* are unstressed as in (10c). While the evidence for weak stress on the noun *man/mon* is not decisive, violation of Sievers’s Rule of Precedence in (10a) may be attributed to low stressability of the non-alliterating nominal in the same verse.

Similarly, in (11) the subject *se gōda* in 758a is rephrased in the next verse and this may be the reason for lack of alliteration on the noun.

- (11) **G**emunde þā se gōda,      mæg Higelāces,      758  
 thought then the good      kinsman Hygelac’s  
 ‘Then the kinsman of Hygelac, the good man, thought’

**G**efeng þā be eaxle      — nalas      for fæhðe mearn —      1537  
 seized then by shoulder      not-at-all for battle shrank-from  
 ‘Then he seized by the shoulder...he did not shrink from the fight’

Further, in 1537a alliteration presumably marks semantic weight: the act of seizing is more significant than the body part that is seized in terms of what happened. While rephrasing and the lower semantic weight with respect to the verb are not the sufficient conditions for lack of alliteration on nominals, they apparently affect alliteration. That is, violation of Sievers’s Rule follows in part from low semantic load of the non-alliterating nominal. On the stressability of *enta geweorc* that cooccurs with the alliterating *seah* in 2717b, see section 6 in Part II.

Lastly, as is partly implied by Orton (1985), alliteration on finite verbs depends on the position in which the verb occurs in the clause (also Y. Suzuki 2008: 100-114). Clause-initial verbs occur in a drop or in an alliterating lift more often than clause-non-initial or especially clause-late verbs, which typically fill a non-alliterating lift. Of the twenty-four alliterating finite verbs that cooccur with a non-alliterating nominal or two in the same verse, thirteen are clause-initial, e.g. *wisse* in (2b), *bāt* in (3b), and *seah* in (5b), six occur after the clause-initial unstressed

light element such as a conjunction, short adverb, or pronoun, i.e. 489b, 1327b, 1548b, 2544b, 2656b, and 2980b, and only five are further later in the clause, i.e. 105b, 1128b, 1175b, 1728b in (4b), and 2344b (also Fulk et al. 2008: 334-335). For examples, see the Appendix in Part II.

In parallel with the finite verb stress in Present-day English, therefore, Sievers's observation requires certain conditions. That is, clause-initial longer forms of lexical verbs are more likely to violate the Rule than other verb forms. And in fact, as Cosmos (1976: 314-318, 328 fn. 25) observes, finite lexical verbs receive certain amount of stress although the verb 'to see' is not a verb with high semantic content and thus is not strongly stressable. Since the stress patterns of finite verbs in Present-day English and in *Beowulf* do not provide unequivocal evidence for or against the unique alliteration of 2717b, the next section examines the alliterative patterns of verses in *Beowulf* where the finite verb and one or more nominals cooccur.

#### 4. Alliteration of finite verbs and nominals in *Beowulf*

This section examines the metrical behavior of finite lexical verbs in order to see to what extent finite verbs alliterate in *Beowulf*. Alliteration in the following discussions includes all that is apparently intentional including what Bliss (1967: 12) calls 'ornamental'. Since the discussions are restricted to lexical verbs, accidental alliteration that does not lead to metrical stress is excluded in the first place. According to Bliss (1967), alliteration on clause-initial verbs or sometimes verbs in second position is considered non-functional, i.e. not marking metrical stress, although intentional. This device is motivated by Kuhn's two Laws that concern distribution of what Kuhn calls *satzpartikel*, unstressed words that belong to the entire clause rather than to its part such as conjunctions, pronouns, short adverbs, and finite verbs (Kuhn 1933: 5). Following Mines (2002), I translate the term as 'clause particles' instead of more commonly used 'sentence particles' because 'clause' rather than 'sentence' is intended here by the German term *satz*. Kuhn's First Law defines the order of clause particles as follows: The clause particles occur in the first drop of the clause, proclitic either to its first or second stressed word ("Die satzpartikeln stehen in der ersten senkung des satzes, in der proklise entweder zu seinem ersten oder zweiten betonten worte"; Kuhn 1933: 8). Kuhn's Second Law defines the clause-initial drop as follows: In the upbeat of the clause, clause particles must occur ("Das germanische satzspitzengesetz: Im satzauftritt müssen satzpartikeln stehen"; Kuhn 1933: 43).

Bliss's 'ornamental' alliteration is justified in two respects. First, Kuhn's *satzpartikeln* or clause particles including finite verbs 'normally stand either before or after the first stressed

element...and in this position they are unstressed' (Bliss 1967: 6, 12). Second, finite verbs, even if they alliterate, are interpreted as unstressed when stress on finite verbs incurs violation of Kuhn's Laws (Bliss 1967: 15-17). For example, in (12) *geseah* in 1557a must be unstressed in Bliss's analysis because, if it is stressed, the unstressed *ðā* violates Kuhn's First Law. Further, the clause-initial drop that consists only of the unstressed verbal prefix *ge-* violates Kuhn's Second Law.

- (12) **Geseah** ðā on gearwum sigēadig bil, 1557  
 saw then in armor victory-blessed blade  
 'Then he saw among the armor a victory-blessed blade' (also in (5a) above)

**Wōd** þā þurh þone wælrēc, wīgheafolan bær 2661  
 advanced then through the deadly-fumes war-head bore  
 'Then he waded through the deadly smoke, bore his war-helmet'

The same analysis is extended to parallel cases where stress on the verb does not incur violation of either law as in 2661a in (12). Thus, according to Bliss, the verb in bold is unstressed (Bliss 1956: 17). On the other hand, clause-initial verbs may bear functional alliteration under certain conditions. That is, clause-initial alliterating verbs are stressed when directly preceded by another finite verb as in 421a in (13), in which case 'from the point of view of stress the two verbs are treated as equivalent, so that the stress of the second depends on the stress of the first' (Bliss 1967: 11).

- (13) þær ic fife geband,  
 where I five bound  
**ȳðde** eotena cyn, ond on ȳðum slōg 420b-421  
 destroyed giants family and in waves slew  
 'where I had bound five, destroyed a family of giants, and in the waves slew...'

gryrelcne gist. **Gyrede** hine Bēowulf 1441  
 terrible stranger dressed himself Beowulf  
 '...terrible alien thing. Beowulf put on...'

In addition, clause-initial alliterating verbs are stressed when required by meter. For example, in 1441b in (13) the verb is the only alliterating word and thus must be stressed.

Although commonly accepted, Bliss's understanding and use of Kuhn's Laws are highly questionable. First, it does not follow from either of the Laws that clause-early finite verbs are unstressed. The First Law states: if unstressed, then clause-early. The law thus implies: if clause-late, then stressed, but not: if clause-early, then unstressed or: if stressed, then clause-late. That is, the First Law does not imply that clause-early finite verbs are unstressed and in fact a number of clause-early verbs must be interpreted as bearing functional alliteration even by Bliss as just shown. In addition, while the number of Kuhn's Law violation is small in *Beowulf*, there is no evidence to assume that violations are to be removed or that the Laws were observed categorically in verse composition. Exclusion of Kuhn's Law violations thus requires justification.

Moreover, there is a problem with the notion of 'ornamental' alliteration (Y. Suzuki 2006-7; 2008). First, while alliteration otherwise marks prominence, the same device used for 'ornament' alone simply causes confusion and does not appear to be reasonable. There is, of course, accidental alliteration, which is both unintended and easily recognizable. It is less frequent than Bliss's 'ornamental' alliteration and is restricted to grammatical words, which lack synonyms. On the other hand, in Bliss's notion of ornamental alliteration, finite lexical verbs alliterate without bearing stress only in clause-initial or -early position although they never alliterate in the fourth lift. It is not clear why the device for marking stress is used for unstressed verbs and why this device is restricted to clause-initial or -early verbs. The device appears to be an arbitrary means to avoid violation of Kuhn's Laws. The simplest solution to the problems just mentioned is to assume that any apparently intentional alliteration marks metrical stress and to leave violations of Kuhn's Laws. In the following discussions, alliterating lexical verbs are interpreted as stressed.

In verses with one verb and one nominal, there are two productive patterns of alliteration: first, alliteration of only the nominal, e.g. 715b in (2a) and 397a in (4a) above, and, second, alliteration of both the verb and the nominal, e.g. 742a in (3a) and 1557a in (5a) above. While in these frequent patterns the verb and the nominal may be in either order, in the rare pattern that violates Sievers's Rule of Precedence, the alliterating verb mostly precedes the non-alliterating nominal. When a finite lexical verb precedes a nominal, only the verb alliterates in twenty-two verses as given in the Appendix, only the nominal alliterates in 62 verses, and both alliterate in 172 verses. These numbers include verses with a nominal compound that may fill



- (16) a. **gebād** wintra worn,                      āer    hē on weg hwurfe,                      264  
           lived winters large-number before he on way went  
           ‘he lived many winters before he went on his way’
- druncon** wīn weras.                      Wyrð ne cūþon,                      1233  
           drank wine men fate not knew  
           ‘men drank wine. They did not know the fate’
- b. holm heolfre **wēoll**,                      ond ic hēafde becearf                      2138  
           sea blood boiled and I head cut-off  
           ‘the flood boiled with blood, and I cut off the head’
- c. æt fōtum **sæt** frēan Scyldinga;  
           at feet sat lord Scyldings  
           gehwylc hiora his fērhþe trēowde,                      1166  
           each of-them his spirit trusted  
           ‘he sat at the feet of the prince of the Scyldings; each of them trusted his spirit’
- d. synsnaedum **swealh**;                      sōna hæfde                      743  
           huge-morsels swallowed at-once had  
           ‘...swallowed huge morsels; quickly he had...

The a-verse in (16c) is hypermetrical with one verb and three nouns. Although the last noun does not alliterate, this verse incurs no violation of Sievers’s Rule of Precedence because the verb also does not alliterate. The a-verse in (16d) is the only verse with triple alliteration, which also conforms to Sievers’s Rule of Precedence. Since the first two lifts form a nominal compound, however, this example must be categorized with verses with one verb and one nominal above.

In *Beowulf*, double alliteration of the verb and the first nominal as exemplified in (15) is observed in twenty verses. These twenty verses with the alliterating verb and nominal involve only verses where the two nominals are separate words. The alliterative pattern is exclusively VNN where alliterating categories are indicated by the underline. With the pattern NNV there

are only verses where the two nominals form a compound. In contrast, double alliteration on the two nominals are observed in only six verses, i.e. five of the pattern VNN as in 264a in (16a) above and one of NNV, i.e. 2138b in (16b).

As has been shown, double alliteration on the verb and the first nominal is more frequent than double alliteration on the two nominals in exclusion of the verb. Even when syntactic constituency is relevant, this fact suggests that the finite lexical verbs receive certain amount of stress in contrast to grammatical words including auxiliaries (Cosmos 1976: 311, 327 fn.13). Therefore, a small number of alliterating verbs in exclusion of one nominal or even two could have been intended instead of being errors.

I examine next the observation that infinitives are in general more stressable than finite verbs, which motivates Donoghue's (1987: 36-40) emendation of 2717b discussed in section 2 above, i.e. *sēon* in place of *seah on*. The observation is supported by the productive alliterative pattern exemplified in (17a) where the infinitive alliterates but not the finite verb.

- (17) a. 'Ēow **hēt**      **secgan**      sigedrihten      mīn,      391  
           you ordered say      victorious-lord my  
           'my victorious lord has bidden [me] to say to you'
- bæt** ic **s**ænaessas      **ges**ēon **mihte**,      571  
           that I headlands      see      might  
           'that I might see the headlands'
- b. **lēte** hyne **licgean**      **b**ær      hē longe wæs,      3082  
           let him lie      where he long was  
           'let him lie where he long was'  
           Also 272a, 1859a, 2767a, 3101a
- c. Hwīlum hē on **l**ufan      **l**æteð **h**worfan      1728  
           at-times he in love      lets      turn  
           'At times He lets...move in delight' (also in (4b) above)

In contrast, there are only four verses with double alliteration on both the finite verb and the infinitive as in (17b) and one example where the finite verb but not the infinitive alliterates as



in (17c). However, a finite verb and an infinitive in the same verse are typically an auxiliary and a lexical verb, respectively, of the same clause. Even when the finite verb is not an auxiliary in the strict sense as *lætan* in (17a, b), the infinitive tends to bear more semantic load than the finite verb. Therefore, precedence of infinitives over finite verbs in alliteration is more likely to follow from lexical categories or semantic weight rather than the distinction between finite and non-finite forms.

Moreover, while infinitives are at least disyllabic in length, finite verbs are often monosyllabic and involve a larger number of auxiliaries than infinitives. That is, since the length of verb forms and lexical categories affect stressability as discussed in section 3, infinitives as a class must be more stressable than finite verbs as a class. In order to justify Donoghue’s emendation, it must be shown that an infinitive is distinctively more stressable than a finite form of the same verb. In *Beowulf*, there are twenty-seven finite forms of *sēon* or *gesēon* that cooccur with at least one nominal in the same verse and nine of them, i.e. one third, alliterate (Fulk et al. 2008). On the other hand, eight infinitive forms of the same verb cooccur with a nominal in the same verse, of which three alliterate. This amounts to 37.5% and is slightly more than one third. The higher ratio of alliteration of infinitives might be attributed to the fact that finite forms include monosyllabic forms while infinitives are di- or trisyllabic. In general, the assumption that infinitives show a distinctively higher ratio of alliteration than finite lexical verbs cannot be supported. Since alliteration in verses with a finite verb and one or more nominals has already been examined, I discuss now for comparison alliteration of infinitives under the same conditions.

When an infinitive cooccurs with one nominal in either order, only the nominal alliterates in 183 verses, e.g. 1010b and 2261b in (18a), and both alliterate in 96 verses, e.g. 27a in (18b).

- (18) a. wolde self cyning                      symbel **p**icgan.                      1010  
           would self king                      feast    consume  
           ‘the king himself would share in the feast’
- æfter wigfruman                      wīde **f**ēran,                      2261  
           on    war-chief                      wide go  
           ‘travel wide on the war-chief’

- b. felahrōr      **fēran**      on frēan wære.      27  
 very-vigorous go      in lord protection  
 ‘the courageous to go into the protection of the Lord’

- c. ‘Mæl is mē tō **fēran**;      fæder alwalda      316  
 time is me to go      father omnipotent  
 ‘It is time for me to go back. The All-Wielding Father’  
 (Andrew 1969: 122; Stanley 1975: 146)

**ðicgean** ofer þā niht.      Þrȳðswȳð behēold      736  
 consume over the night      strong watched  
 ‘...feast over that night. The mighty man watched...’

There are only two verses given in (18c), where an infinitive alliterates but not the noun. Compare 316a in (18c) with 2261b in (18a) and 27a in (18b); 736a in (18c) with 1010b in (18a).

While finite verbs often cooccur with two nominals, infinitives rarely do. In one verse given in (19a) only the first noun alliterates.

(19) a. NNV

sorhfulne sīð,      sunu dēoð **wre**can.      1278  
 sorrowful venture      son death avenge  
 ‘a sorrowful venture, avenge her son’s death’

b. VNN

**sē**can dēofla gedræg;      ne wæs his drohtoð þær      756  
 seek devils host      not was his way-of-life there  
 ‘...seek his rabble of devils. What he met there was not’

**sē**cean wynlēas wīc;      wiste þē geornor      821  
 seek joyless home      knew the more-surely  
 ‘...seek his joyless home. He knew the more surely’

There are two verses, i.e. 756a and 821a, where double alliteration involves two nominals as

given in (19b). On the other hand, there are seven verses where the infinitive and the first nominal alliterate as in (20).

(20) a. VNN

sēcean s̥awle hord,                      s̥undur gedælan                      2422  
 seek    soul    hoard                      asunder divide  
 ‘seek his soul’s hoard, divide apart...’  
 Also 1163a, 1485a, 1904a, 2525a, 3115a

b. NNV

beorht hofu    bærnan —                      brynelōma stōd                      2313  
 bright houses burn                      gleam-of-fire stood  
 ‘burn bright dwellings; blaze of fire rose’

As shown above, infinitives and not just finite verbs tend to receive weaker stress than nominals. There are in fact unstressed finite lexical verbs in clause-initial position, e.g. (14) and (16a), but few unstressed infinitives, i.e. (19b), and this fact may be interpreted as the evidence that infinitives are more stressable than finite verbs. However, stressability depends in part on the position in the clause as discussed in section 3. While finite verbs often occur in clause-initial position, where they are unstressed, non-finite verbs do not occur clause-initially and this distributional property might be the reason for the fact that they occur mostly in metrically stressed position. The alliterative patterns of finite lexical verbs and infinitives as examined above suggest that Donoghue’s (1987) emendation of replacing the alliterating finite verb with an infinitive does not necessarily conform better to the alliterative patterns observed in *Beowulf*.

## Notes

\* I thank two anonymous reviews for comments on an earlier version of this paper. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Twenty-fifth Annual Meeting of the Western Branch of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies at Kansai University on June 13th, 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Examples from Old English *Beowulf* are cited from Fulk et al. (2008). The number refers to the line number, and a and b after the line number represent the a-verse and the b-verse, respectively. The two

The alliterating verb in *Beowulf* 2717b *seah on enta geweorc*, Part I

verses that form a long line are separated by a space. Alliteration is marked by an underline. The Present-day English translation is cited from Donaldson (2002) and adapted where necessary.

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