

REVIEWS

Fred C. Robinson: *The Editing of Old English*

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Any student of Old English language and literature who has ever examined a verse or prose text in its manuscript form would certainly notice how greatly the modern printed edition diverges from the original. First to be noted is that Old English verse texts in manuscripts are written out continuously like prose. The punctuation found in modern editions, such as commas, periods, colons, semicolons etc., is almost non-existent in Old English manuscripts and, as Mitchell warns us, sometimes distorts both the structure and the meaning of Old English texts, even though it is introduced to facilitate our comprehension. The spacing between words and between compound elements in the manuscripts is by no means systematic: a single word is often written separately while a compound is usually written as if it were two words. Thus, an editorial decision often has to be made as to whether a sequence is to be represented as a compound or a syntactic phrase. Finally, it is to be added that few Old English poems are given a title in their manuscripts, a title like *Beowulf* being later invented. Thus, when studying an Old English text through a modern printed edition, one has to be cautious about how much information in the edited text has been supplied by the editor, and how much information in the original manuscript might have been lost in the process of editing.

In a collection of 22 essays, Fred C. Robinson addresses these issues and discusses a variety of problems which would arise in the course of editing Old English texts. Except for one that appears for the first time, each of the essays has already been published in various journals and books, and is reprinted here with some revision and updating. The book consists of four parts. Part I contains 3 essays and demonstrates the danger of relying too much on modern printed editions of texts, which might have lost some of the meaning and form of the original manuscripts. Part II (12 essays) sheds new light on certain textual problems in Old English by reexamining them in their manuscript context. Part III (4 essays) deals with some lexicographical problems that confront editors of Old English, e.g. the treatment of spelling variants, cruxes and Latin words in Old English texts. Finally, Part IV (3 essays) reconsiders three Old English texts in the light of their original contexts and attempts the experiment of reediting them in a totally new fashion. In what

follows, I should like to choose some of the essays in each part of the book for closer examination and to consider important editorial issues raised by the author.

In the first part, Robinson starts by examining *The Metrical Epilogue to MS. 41, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge*, a short poem of ten lines in Volume VI of the *ASPR*, which Dobbie regards as a scribal addition to the Old English text of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. According to Robinson, the beginning of this poem, particularly the adverb *eac* 'also', sounds a bit bizarre:

Bidde ic eac æghwylcne mann

Although an adverb of this sort is usually used to add something to something else already mentioned, there is no preceding text to refer to. Robinson returns to the manuscript and finds that the poem is preceded by two prose petitions. It follows that the adverb *eac* serves to link the poem to the preceding two prose texts. (The second prose petition also has the adverb *eac* at the beginning, which connects it with the first prose text.) A further examination of the poem in the manuscript reveals that the scribe wrote both the verse and the two prose petitions "in the same stately script he used for the text of the *History* itself" (p. 13). This leads Robinson to suggest that the Old English poem is not a scribe's colophon but is rather intended as Bede's own envoi or concluding words. It is to be added here that in this manuscript the scribe's additions are written in script of smaller size. In Part IV of the book, the author provides an edition of "Bede's envoi" where the verse petition immediately follows the two prose petitions, noting that in Old English the juxtaposition of verse with prose within the same text was not uncommon.

When they encounter obscure linguistic forms in Old English manuscripts, some scholars ascribe them to scribal errors or manuscript corruptions and propose emendations to give a satisfactory reading. The author expresses reservations about resorting too readily to emendation because it is often the case that "a manuscript reading, when rightly understood, is no crux at all but is in fact preferable on all counts to a venerable emendation" (p. 47). In one of the essays in Part II, Robinson reexamines a long-standing crux in *Beowulf* (67–70):

Him on mod bearn
þæt healreced hatan wolde,
medoærn micel, men gewyrcean
þonne ylðo bearn æfre gefrunon

The difficulty in the above passage is that the form *micel* is not the expected comparative form required by the *þonne* 'than' clause and that the adverb *æfre* 'ever' is often associated with a comparative construction. An examination of the manuscript, however, reveals that the manuscript reading is not *þonne* but *þone*. According

to Robinson, the original form gives a possible reading since *þone* (the masculine relative pronoun) agrees with *healreced* 'hall-building' (masculine), which is in apposition with *medoærn* 'mead-hall' (neuter). It is not uncommon, he adds, that of two appositive nouns the first one determines the gender of the following (relative) pronoun (cf. *Beowulf* 771–3, 1342–4). Worth mentioning here is Ono's recent article that discusses the same Beowulfian passage. Although he generally accepts Robinson's reading, Ono proposes to emend *æfre* to *ær ne* to yield a familiar poetic formula **RELATIVE PRONOUN - SUBJECT - ær ne - VERB** (cf. *Beowulf* 941, *Exodus* 28, 285b) as well as to give a more satisfactory meaning to the passage ('which the sons of men had not heard of before'):

þone ylðo bearn ær ne gefrunon

In an essay concerning another Beowulfian crux, Robinson considers a phonological parallel between Old English and American English:

Site nu to symle, ond on sæl meoto (*Beowulf* 489)

Klaeber takes *meoto* for an otherwise unattested noun meaning 'meditation, thought(s)', while other editors regard it as the imperative of a hypothetical verb **meotian* 'think of'. To begin with, the author notices that [t] and [d] in intervocalic position are merged in American English where *petal* and *pedal* are homophonous. Confusion of [t] and [d] is also attested in Old English: cf. *gloetas* 'flame' for *gloedas* in the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. This leads him to take *meoto* as a phonetic variant of a well-attested noun *meodo* 'mead', and to translate the passage as 'Sit now to the banquet and, in time, (to) the mead.' Robinson emphasizes that "the relevance and utility of American English" should be fully appreciated in the study of early English texts where few scholars seriously consider evidence from the dialects of English in the United States (cf. p. 82).

Robinson's treatment of the preceding cruxes might give the reader the impression that he would adopt a conservative attitude toward manuscripts. In other cases, however, Robinson does solve textual problems by proposing fresh and elegant emendations. In *Beowulf*, alliteration is absent between 389a and 390b:

Deniga leodum." * * *
* * * word inne ahead:

Dobbie assumes a gap between the two half-lines and leaves it blank as above. Klaeber supplies two half-lines to provide alliteration:

Deniga leodum.' [þa to dura eode
widcuð hæleð.] word inne ahead:

Robinson, on the other hand, regards the two half-lines 389a and 390b as consisting of a single long-line, emending MS *leodum* 'people' to *weorode* 'troop', which alliterates with *word* 'word':

Deniga weorode." Word inne ahead:

Robinson's emendation does not, however, seem to be entirely satisfactory. In *Beowulf*, the verse formula '*Denig(e)a* NOUN' has 6 instances where the proper name never fails to alliterate (cf. 271a, 359a, 696a, 1323a, 1680b, 1712b). (In the reversed formula 'NOUN *Denig(e)a*', a noun precedes *Denig(e)a* '(of) Danes' in alliteration.) In addition, alliteration usually does not fall only on the second arsis of the first half-line unless the first arsis is of less rhythmic stress than the second: here *Deniga* receives as strong stress as *weorode*.

In Part III Robinson turns to examine some other problems that have to be faced in the process of editing Old English texts. He starts with metathesis, "the transposition of consonants or of a consonant and a vowel when the sounds are adjacent or proximate" (p. 131). Since metathesized forms are often regularized in printed editions through emendation, Robinson has carefully scrutinized textual notes and manuscripts for spelling variants and has recovered some overlooked examples of metathesis. For instance, although the metathesized form *flæcs* for *flæsc* 'flesh' is not listed in Bosworth-Toller, Toller and Clark Hall-Meritt, Robinson has found two instances of *flæcs* in the *Paris Psalter* (cf. 101.4.7, 135.26.1.), both of which Krapp emended into *flæsc*. I should like to add 3 prose instances of *flæcs* listed in Healey-Venezky (cf. *PsGlk(Sisam)* 15.9, 27.8, *PsCak(Sisam)* 7.42), which Robinson does not mention. At first glance, these rare examples of metathesis look like mere scribal errors rather than genuine metathesis. The author, however, argues for metathesis in *flæcs* because the metathesized form *flex* repeatedly appears in Middle English. Note that the *MED* recognizes the spelling variant *flexs*.

On the other hand, the author expresses doubt about the metathesis in *smile* for *simle* 'ever, always': this transposed spelling occurs 11 times, exclusively in *The Soliloquies of Augustine*. Although its relatively frequent occurrence might lead one to assume metathesis here, Robinson notices that the scribe of this text spells so many words in rather peculiar ways that *smile* should not be regarded as genuine metathesis. From this we draw the moral that "it is important to notice individual scribal habits when searching for metathesis" (p. 146).

In Kemble's edition of the *Dialogue of Salomon and Saturnus*, there occurs a compound *wiperbersta*, which is not found elsewhere. Toller and Clark Hall-Meritt list this word as a hapax legomenon and give the meaning of 'adversary'. By carefully examining the manuscript, Robinson has found that *wiperbersta* is a ghost word due to Kemble's miscopying and that the original reading is *wiperbreota*, which itself is otherwise unattested. Since two letters *t* and *c* tend to be confused in the manu-

script, Robinson emends *wiberbreota* to *wiberbreoca* 'adversary'; the latter is attested in other Old English texts (cf. *Gen* 64, 2290, *Dan* 565, *Jln* 269, *Glc* 294, etc.). Robinson's reading is adopted by Healey-Venezky.

The treatment of Latin words in Old English manuscripts also causes difficulty to an editor who attempts to establish his or her text. Although most modern editors tend to print Latin words as Latin in their editions, it is not rare, according to Robinson, for Old English scribes to substitute shorter Latin forms for Old English words for convenience. In *Elene*, for instance, the scribe writes *rex* for *cyning* 'king' (cf. 610 and 1041) and *ket* (the abbreviation for Latin *Kalend*) in place of Old English *monað* 'month' (cf. 1228):

oncyrran rex geniðlan; he wæs on þære cwene gewældum: (610)
unrihte æ. Him wearð ece rex (1041)
on Maias kalend [MS. k1]. Sie þara manna gehwam (1228)

Considering the requirements of alliteration in lines 610 and 1228, the author claims that "Cynewulf intended the Old English words, not the Latin ones, and the scribe, not the poet, is responsible for the Latin graphs representing Old English words" (p. 161). I do not think it strictly necessary to substitute *monað* for *kalend* in *Elene* (1228) since alliteration on the second arsis is optional in a first half-line. It might be worth noticing here that in the *Menologium* (7) Latin *kalend* alliterates so that it cannot be replaced by Old English *monað*:

for þy se kalend us cymeð gepincged

Robinson considers another Latin word (i.e. *pellicane*) in the *Paris Psalter* (101.5.1):

Ic geworden eom *pellicane* gelic

Since *pellicane* fails to alliterate, Robinson suggests that what the poet intended was not the Latin word but the Old English *wanfota* 'pelican', which alliterates with (*ge*)*worden*. Robinson's reading here is not so persuasive as in the case of *rex* above, because it does not seem likely that the scribe replaced *wanfota* by *pellicane* to seek a shorter form. It should be noted here that the Latin word *pellicanus* gave difficulties to Old English translators and glossators, for they would not be familiar with a bird known as a pelican. In *Eadwine's Canterbury Psalter*, Latin *pellicanus* would have been mistakenly etymologized as **pellis canis* and was glossed as *felle hundes* 'a dog's skin' (cf. Lass 1994). Under these circumstances, it would not be totally unlikely that the translator of the *Paris Psalter* might fail to identify the exact referent of the Latin word and leave it untranslated, even though *pellicane* does not provide alliteration.

In this review article I have focused on several essays to illustrate the main editorial problems discussed in Robinson's book. I should like to conclude by adding that the rest of his essays (although unmentioned here because of limita-

tions of space) are of as much importance, and will surely enable the reader to find great pleasure in other fresh discoveries as well as encourage him or her to consider the manuscript context when studying Old English texts henceforth.

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