# POETIC DICTION
# IN THE OLD ENGLISH
# METERS OF BOETHIUS

*by*

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# PREFACE

This is a study of the words an Old English poet added as he changed prose into verse – words that were not to be found in the prose text before him. His additions were not few. In later times, the nature of English poetry would change,[1] but in Old English, poetry required specialized syntax and diction as well as meter and alliteration.[2] Even with the temptation of ready-made prose at hand, the versifier of the *Meters of Boethius* made copious use of the special vocabulary of poetry. To be sure, he adopted more of the prose vocabulary,[3] and less of the poetic,[4] than most other Old English poets. Nevertheless, between one-third and one-quarter of the vocabulary of the *Meters* has no counterpart anywhere in the 50,000 words of the Old English prose Boethius. The versifier would introduce a poetic word on the average every two and a half lines.

It is easy enough to list this poetic vocabulary with the help of published glossaries and concordances. This study goes further, to examine how the

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[1] Josephine Miles notes, for English and American poetry in post-medieval times, that "most of the major language is shared in common and comes from the basic stock of the words most commonly spoken, monosyllabic or disyllabic language.... Prose, not poetry, is the specializer of language in its materials of choice." *Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 98. Old English prose and poetry both are specialized in this sense.

[2] Ælfric managed "to divorce the rhythm and alliteration of Old English poetry from its traditional vocabulary and syntax and to associate them with the vocabulary and syntax of prose", observes Peter Clemoes, "Ælfric", in *Continuations and Beginnings*, ed. Eric Gerald Stanley (London: Nelson, 1966), p. 203. Ælfric's combination, lacking poetic syntax and diction, is generally considered to be prose.

[3] See E. G. Stanley, "Studies in the Prosaic Vocabulary of Old English Verse", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971), 390–91; also Robert J. Menner, "The Date and Dialect of *Genesis A* 852–2936", *Anglia* 70 (1951), 290. On the problem of studying non-poetic vocabulary, with reference to Latin literature, see Bertil Axelson, *Unpoetische Wörter(-Skrifter Utgivna av Vetenskaps-Societeten i Lund*, 29) (Lund, 1945).

[4] Menner, "*Genesis A*", pp. 287–88.

poet used the words, how he seems to have chosen particular words for particular positions and functions. It will appear that the poet's use of his poetic vocabulary is anything but random. Particular stages in adapting his prose text, particular metrical and syntactic situations, and particular collocations of vocabulary, more often than semantic demands, seem to have governed his use of the poetic vocabulary, because in the *Meters of Boethius* the poetic vocabulary generally has a minimal role in advancing the arguments and illustrations of the prose. The poet seems to have valued the poetic diction for its formal qualities, not for its content. It simply signifies to reader or hearer that the *Meters* are poetry (as in the Latin original), not prose.

Professor David Premack of the University of California, Santa Barbara, who has trained a chimpanzee to communicate in an impressively complex and abstract symbolic language, was recently asked whether he thought chimpanzees could be taught to communicate like humans. "No", he replied. "We have underestimated the abilities of chimpanzees, but we have underestimated the abilities of humans too." The art of even a mediocre Old English poet is far too complex for any single study to investigate completely.[5] This book limits itself to one aspect of that art, the poetic vocabulary, in hopes of contributing to our still embryonic understanding of the nature of Old English poetic composition.

Much of this book consists of studies of individual words and the circumstances in which the poet used them. But the forest is of interest as well as the trees. The beginnings of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, therefore, list all occurrences of all words found in the *Meters* but not in the prose. With the reference to each occurrence is a notation of the circumstances of that occurrence: whether or not there is a related (though different) prose source for the word; the degree of independence from the prose of the verse line in which the word appears; whether the word carries stress and alliterates. The notation is in a simple numeric code which the reader may find inconvenient at first, but which is easily learned, and which permits quick reference and convenient summary. Tables following the lists of words, and in the concluding chapter, indicate at a glance the most common situations for the use of poetic words. The tabulations should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive; they lead into discussions of how the poet generally made use of the poetic vocabulary.

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[5]  Another approach to the art of the *Meters*, focusing on formulas and formulaic systems, is illustrated in John W. Conlee, "A Note on Verse Composition in the *Meters of Boethius*" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970), 576–85.

The prose and verse of the Old English Boethius provide the criteria for deciding which words belong in this study. Also important for the analysis is the way in which other Old English literature uses these words. The relative paucity of the surviving corpus of Old English verse and prose must of course caution against overconfident conclusions, and so must the current lack of up-to-date concordances, especially to the prose. Nevertheless, existing texts and reference materials permit one sort of useful division into three categories: first, poetic words which are apparently unique to the *Meters of Boethius* and found elsewhere neither in poetry nor prose; second, poetic words which occur "only or mainly in poetical texts", as indicated by Clark Hall;[6] and third, poetic words which occur freely elsewhere in both poetry and prose. Chapter 2 deals with the first group, Chapter 3 with the second, Chapter 4 with the third.

In addition to the more than five hundred words which are strictly the poet's own additions, there are quite a few more that are almost poetic by this criterion. That is, they occur occasionally in the prose, but much more often in the *Meters*, even though the prose Boethius amounts to 50,000 words and the *Meters* to less than 10,000. Some of these words seem much like their entirely poetic counterparts in Chapters 2–4. Chapter 5 accordingly discusses certain "nearly poetic" words, those which never occur in the prose that corresponds to the *Meters*, and Chapter 6 mentions some of the "partly poetic" vocabulary, words that at times do occur in the prose source of the *Meters*, but more often are the poet's additions.

Chapter 7 then summarizes the chief characteristics of the poetic vocabulary, and compares its use in the *Meters* with that in other Old English poetry – *Beowulf*, *Judith*, and the *Battle of Maldon*.

This study began as a doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley, under the direction and with the helpful advice of Professors Alain Renoir, Paul Theiner, and Charles Witke. Their suggestions and comments have been invaluable. Professor Donald K. Fry, of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, provided bibliographical assistance. Intramural Research Grants Nos. 8028 and 9103 of the University of California, Riverside, supported the production by computer of a concordance to the prose Boethius, which helped especially with the study of nearly and partly poetic words (Chapters 5 and 6).

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[6] John R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed. with supp. by Herbert D. Meritt (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1960), p. [ix].

Thomas E. Armbruster, Edgar C. Howell IV, and George Musacchio assisted in the concordance project. My wife Teri provided much encouragement and helped prepare the index of words cited, which is an essential reference tool for the user of this work. For all of this help I am grateful.

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## PRELIMINARY

Near the close of the ninth century A.D. and of his own life, King Alfred the Great of Wessex freely translated the Latin *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius[1] into 50,000 lines of vernacular prose.[2] Very soon thereafter, Alfred or some other West Saxon transformed into Old English poetry the Old English prose passages which correspond to certain of the Metra in the Latin original.[3] Alfred's translation from Latin into Old English prose has long been praised as a masterpiece, both of his own writing and of Old English prose in general.

... one of his books ... more than the others is instinct with a certain anonymously personal note such as we look for in vain in English literature for hundreds of years after. This book is his version of the *Consolations of Philosophy* of Boethius.... [4]

[1]    Richard H. Green's recent paperback translation, *Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy (The Library of Liberal Arts)* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), in its excellent introduction, provides up-to-date information and a bibliography on the life and writings of Boethius and the texts of the Latin *Consolation*.

[2]    Asser's *Life of Alfred*, dated 893 A.D., does not mention any of the five translations by Alfred which followed Werferth's version of Gregory's *Dialogues*, so "we may think that none of these was begun before late in 893 or afterward". Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alfred the Great* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 147. This book devotes two chapters to Alfred's translations; it is an excellent introduction to him and them.

[3]    "... if we accept Wülker's date 897 for the prose translation, then the Meters would probably have followed shortly after. If Alfred did not compose the Meters, then no definite posterior limit can be set except the date of the manuscript [of the version containing the Meters], about 970. But the most probable date is 897 or shortly afterwards." George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ($=ASPR$, 5) (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1932), p. xlvii.

A typical example of the way in which the Old English poet relied on the Old English prose rather than the Latin Boethius is his method of determining which passages to versify. Every time the Old English prose states, "Then Wisdom began to sing", the poet begins his versifying, and he usually continues until he encounters the prose statement, "When Wisdom had sung this...." The form of the Latin original was irrelevant to his decision.

[4]    Walter John Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Boethius*

The result was really a book of his own, stamped from beginning to end with his own character, inspired by his faith: a vivid, warm, clear, and simple discourse on the Christian God as the Center and Foundation, the Life Eternal of all souls in this world and beyond. (Duckett, *Alfred the Great*, p. 172.)

It is common knowledge that Alfred's translation of *De consolatione philosophiae* is his most ambitious work and the finest achievement in the history of Old English prose.[5]

Alfred's free rendering of Boethius did indeed make his translation more than either a "word by word, or sense by sense" version of the *Consolation;* it made it a literary and philosophical document in its own right.[6]

The old English *MBo*,[7] however, has generally been damned with as much vigor as *PrBo* has been praised. *MBo*, it seems, lacks the originality and imagination which make *PrBo* so much admired.

It is established beyond doubt that the Cotton Metra are based directly on the corresponding prose version found in B, without further reference to the Latin original. They reproduce in metrical dress the prose version, omitting little, and adding few thoughts of any importance; and they seem to have been composed by rearranging the words of the prose version, and inserting poetical commonplaces or 'tags', to bring the lines into an alliterating form, much as a schoolboy might use a Gradus in making Latin verses.[8]

Its weakness of composition, experts have argued, makes it inferior to Alfred's own prose version. Why should he have made so poor a metrical translation after he had made so decent a showing in prose? (Duckett, *Alfred the Great*, p. 177.)

As poetry, they are not especially noteworthy. ... (Greenfield, *Critical History*, p. 187.)

Insofar as criticism complains of lack of originality in *MBo*, it seems wide of the mark. There is no evidence that the author of *MBo* tried but failed to be original. Instead, it appears that he tried to give the prose the dress and ornament of poetry without changing the ideas and arguments

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(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), p. viii. This is a modern English translation, not the book cited elsewhere (e.g. in n. 8).

[5] Kurt Otten, *König Alfreds Boethius* ( = *Studien zur englischen Philologie, neue Folge*, 3) (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1964), p. 280. This passage is from Otten's English-language summary.

[6] Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1965), p. 36.

[7] This abbreviation and others in this book are the ones proposed by Francis P. Magoun, Jr., in "Abbreviated Titles for the Poems of the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Corpus", *Études anglaises* 8 (1955), 138–46. *MBo* means "The Meters of Boethius". An analogous symbol, *PrBo*, means "The Old English Prose Boethius".

[8] Walter John Sedgefield, ed., *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), p. xxxviii.

of his source. In this he succeeded.[9] The very closeness of *MBo* to *PrBo*, and the almost complete lack of other sources for *MBo* than *PrBo*,[10] make *MBo* especially suitable for studying the diction which distinguishes Old English poetry from Old English prose.

Never since the end of the Old English period, not even in the most neoclassical decades of the eighteenth century, has the language of English poetry differed so greatly from the language of prose as it did in Alfred's time; nor has the form of poetry ever again been so uniform as it was before the Conquest of nine hundred years ago. Whether he was composing an epic like *Beowulf* or translating the Psalms, framing riddles or narrating a saint's life, the Old English poet used only one verse form and the traditional vocabulary that went with it. Whether he was awakened in the middle of the night to sing extemporaneously on the Creation, or sat down to transform the written prose text of Boethius into poetry, it had to come out sounding the same, or neither the author nor his audience would consider it Anglo-Saxon poetry. As Greenfield says of *MBo*, in Alfred's "employment of the poetic vocabulary and formulas, as well as of the alliterative line, the king forged his *Meters* in the Old English poetic tradition, despite the intractability of much of the subject matter of the *Consolation*" (*Critical History*, p. 188). There was no other way.

Old English poetry thus presents a marked difference between poetry and prose, and a marked invariability of form. And it offers, in *MBo*, an opportunity to observe a poet at work fashioning poems from a vernacular prose source, adopting certain words from the prose and rejecting others, to emerge with a diction properly poetic.

This diction, and the ways in which the poet used it, are the concerns of this book.

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[9]   The lack of originality has made some scholars unwilling to ascribe the authorship of *MBo* to Alfred. See Allan A. Metcalf, "On the Authorship and Originality of the *Meters of Boethius*", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970), 185–87.

[10]   Independent additions to *MBo* are so rare that they have repeatedly received special mention. The most "original" of the *MBo* poet's contributions is the simile, *MBo* 20, 169–75, likening the universe to an egg. Even this contribution, however, seems to derive from a Latin commentary. See Brian S. Donaghey, "The Sources of King Alfred's Translation of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*", *Anglia* 72 (1964), 30–31. For notes on the few places where *MBo* seems closer to Boethius' latin than *PrBo*, and other comments on the relationship between *PrBo* and *MBo*, see Karl Heinz Schmidt, *König Alfreds Boethius-bearbeitung*, Diss. (Göttingen, 1934), pp. 11, 12, 13, 16, 25 (n. 4), 29 (n. 4), 49 (n. 3), 54 (n. 1), 61 (n. 1).

## TEXTS

There are three important modern editions of the Old English Boethius, two of the *MBo* alone and one of *PrBo* plus *MBo*. In 1899, as the celebration of the millennium of the death of "England's Darling" approached, Walter John Sedgefield published the text of both prose and poetical versions in *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), hereafter cited simply as "Sedgefield". In addition to providing the best text of the prose, Sedgefield included a 120-page Glossary which carefully records variant forms and which comes close to being a concordance.[11]

Soon thereafter appeared an edition of the *Meters* alone, by Ernst Krämer: *Die altenglischen Metra des Boetius* (= *Bonner Beiträge zur Anglistik*, 8) (Bonn, 1902), hereafter cited as "Kraemer". The most useful feature of this edition is its complete glossary and concordance, which occupies 48 pages.[12] Kraemer and Sedgefield cooperated with each other in preparing their editions.[13]

The most recent edition of *MBo* is that which is now standard, *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ed. George Philip Krapp (= *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 5) (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1932), hereafter cited as "Krapp". Its notes record the textual emendations and criticisms made in previous editions and articles, and its introduction summarizes in considerable detail what has been learned about the MSS., including also brief mention of the authorship controversy and a bibliography.

Krapp is quoted for *MBo*, Sedgefield for *PrBo*. Numbers following

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[11]   Sedgefield often gives only representative rather than exhaustive listings of the occurrences of words. I have compiled a concordance (see Preface) to supplement his glossary.

Sedgefield notes some of the typographical errors in his edition on pp. xliv and 149. Among the errors he does not note are these: The last line of the entry for *fæder*, p. 234, should read "xvii. 26, xx. 116" instead of "xvii. 26, 116"; the fourth-to-last line of the entry for *rice*, p. 281, should list "ix. 10", not "ix. 3, 10"; line 4 of the entry for *willan*, p. 317, should read "xxiv. 53", not "xxiv. 52"; the entry for *Italia*, p. 327, should read "7. 3, i. 12", not "7. 3, i. 15, viii. 50". Donaghey, *Anglia*, 72 (1964), 25, notes that Sedgefield incorrectly quotes a passage from William of Malmesbury (by leaving out *verbis* between the words *planioribus elucidavit*) on p. xxxvii.

[12]   After using it extensively, I have found no omissions in Kraemer's glossary, except in the case of the five most frequent words *(and, he, ne, se, þæt)*, where the author clearly indicates he is making only a partial listing. I have found only one error: the entry for *inweardlice* should read XXII, 2, not XX, 2.

[13]   Kraemer, p. [iii]; Sedgefield, p. ix.

"*MBo*" indicate Meter and line number. *MBo* 31,2, for example, means Meter 31, Line 2. Numbers following "*PrBo*" indicate page and line number in Sedgefield. *PrBo* 49,10 thus means Page 49, Line 10. I have silently expanded the conventional abbreviations in Sedgefield's text.

## TERMINOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

Words which occur only in *MBo*, and never in *PrBo*, may be termed **entirely poetic** as far as the Old English Boethius is concerned. Depending on their use elsewhere in Old English, the entirely poetic words fall into three categories, each treated in a separate chapter.

1A. **Unique poetic words** are those which occur once or twice in *MBo* but nowhere else in Old English, neither in prose nor in poetry.

1B. **Exclusively poetic words** are those which occur only in *MBo* and never in *PrBo*, and which in addition are marked with a dagger by Clark Hall to indicate that they occur "only or mainly in poetical texts".[14] A number of words which Clark Hall marks with a dagger occur in *PrBo*. Such words are excluded from this group.

1C. **Limited poetic words** are those which occur only in *MBo* and never in *PrBo*, but which Clark Hall does not mark with a dagger. Only in the Boethius translation, not in Old English literature as a whole, are these words restricted to poetry.

Since there are about 50,000 words in *PrBo* and only 10,000 in *MBo*, the chances are about ten to one against a word occurring more often in *MBo*. Those words which defy these odds deserve some attention in a study of poetic diction, even if they do occur in the prose and thus do not count strictly as the poet's own contributions. Two chapters, therefore, deal with certain poetic words found also in the prose.

2A. **Nearly poetic words** are those which occur not just in *MBo* but also in one or more *PrBo* passages which do **not** correspond to any of the *MBo*. In this and the following category only those words which occur mainly in *MBo* are listed. Those which occur once or twice independently in *MBo* but dozens of times in the prose can sometimes meet the criteria for these categories, but they have little in common with the other elements of poetic diction.

2B. **Partly poetic words** are those which do occur at least once in *PrBo*

[14] John R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed. with supplement by Herbert D. Meritt (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960), p. [ix]. About one-fifth of the entries in Clark Hall are marked with a dagger.

passages corresponding to the *MBo*, but not as often in these *PrBo* passages as in *MBo*.

Listings of words in the following chapters give the location of each occurrence in *MBo* together with certain prominent aspects of the "situation" of the word in that occurrence, as specified by four numbers and sometimes an asterisk or a hyphen. The numbers signify as follows:

1 – The word is independent of *PrBo*; that is, there is no related, similar word in the corresponding passage of *PrBo*. An example is *eallmægene* in this passage:

> gif hi ne ðiowedon hiora fruman.     (*PrBo* 136,31)
> *gif hi* eallmægene     *hiora* ord*fruman*     (*MBo* 29,95)[15]

2 – The word is dependent on *PrBo*; it derives from a related, similar word in the corresponding passage of *PrBo*. Examples are *gif, hi, hiora*, and ord*fruman* in the line quoted above.

3 – The entire *MBo* line is independent of *PrBo*; no *MBo* word containing a stressed syllable derives from a related similar word in *PrBo*. Several such lines occur when the poet, independent of *PrBo*, likens the universe to an egg:

> þæm anlicost     þe on æge bið,     (*MBo* 20,169)

Any word in the line fits in this category.

4 – The verse containing the word in question is independent of *PrBo*, but the opposite verse derives at least in part from *PrBo*. More precisely, none of the stressed words in the verse containing the word derives from *PrBo*, but at least one of the stressed words in the other verse does. In *MBo* 29,95 above, *eallmægene* is in this situation, because the two prose-derived words sharing its verse are unstressed, while both words in the other verse derive from *PrBo*.

5 – The verse containing the word in question derives at least in part from *PrBo*, while the opposite verse is independent of *PrBo*. More precisely, at least one of the stressed words in the verse containing the word derives from *PrBo*, but none of the stressed words in the other verse does. This situation is thus the reverse of 4. Both *hiora* and *ordfruman* in *MBo*

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[15] Italicized words or parts of words in *MBo* citations derive from the corresponding *PrBo* text. Words not italicized are the poet's independent additions.

29,95 fall into this category. The word in question need not itself be derived from *PrBo*; such is the case in this occurrence of *monnes:*

> þære saule. (*PrBo* 81,25)
> Hio is þæt mæste mægen    monnes *saule*    (*MBo* 20,202)

6 – Both verses derive at least in part from *PrBo*. More precisely, at least one stressed word in each verse derives from *PrBo*. Every word in the following line of Meter 20 fits in this situation:

> ac ponne hio ymbe hi selfe smeað,    (*PrBo* 81,30)
> *þonne hio ymb hi selfe*    secende *smeað*;    (*MBo* 20,221)

(In determining situations 3 through 6, only the words which contain the four primary stresses in each line are considered.)

7 – The word alliterates.

8 – The word does not alliterate. Designations 7 and 8 refer only to primary alliteration. Words which alliterate, of course, carry primary stress. In the case of those which do not alliterate (designation 8), a further designation is added: an asterisk (*) if the word carries primary stress, a hyphen (–) if it does not.

9 – The word occurs in the on-verse.

0 – The word occurs in the off-verse.

A combination of four of these numbers describes the "situation" of any word in *MBo*. The situation designation includes these parts in this order:

|  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 3, | | | |
| 1 | 4, | 7 | 9 | (* |
| or | 5, | or | or | or |
| 2 | or | 8 | 0 | –) |
| | 6 | | | |

In *MBo* 29,95, for example, *eallmægene* is in situation #1479; *ordfruman* is in situation #2570. In *MBo* 20,169, *æge* is in situation #1370, *þe* in #1380-, *bið* in #1380*. In the listings of words in the following chapters, the situation appears in parentheses after the line designation. For example, the occurrence of *æge* just mentioned would be listed as 20,169(1370).

For words in poems other than *MBo* it is possible to determine only two of these four parts of the situation, that is, whether a word alliterates

or not, and in which verse it appears. Each occurrence may be designated with two digits:

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7    9    (*
or   or   or
8    0    -)
```

The occurrence of *geardagum* in the opening line of *Beowulf*, for example, can be listed as *Bwf* 1(70).

The lists of words are arranged according to the entries in Kraemer's glossary, for two reasons: Kraemer makes more and finer distinctions among forms than Sedgefield, and he generally uses the forms actually found in *MBo* rather than the standardized Early West Saxon forms of Sedgefield's glossary.

Of course, Kraemer's greater scattering of words under different headings cannot be considered *a priori* more true to the Old English poet's own sense of the boundaries of words than Sedgefield's distribution. One way to judge what distinctions a poet made between forms is to observe the ways in which he used the different forms, and many of the following comments on individual words discuss the relationships, or lack of them, among uses of related forms. On some occasions Kraemer's greater distinctions seem important; there are times, for example, when the poet consistently makes different uses of certain words distinguished only by the presence or absence of the *ge-* prefix. At other times Sedgefield's practice of combining *ge-* prefixed and unprefixed words under the same heading seems more appropriate. In any case, the proportions and percentages in the statistics would remain about the same if Sedgefield's headings were used, although the tabulations and listings would differ slightly.

## THE COMPOSITION OF THE *METRICAL PSALMS*

In an effort to see exactly how such poetry is put together, I have ... sought to analyze an Anglo-Saxon poetic translation. ... Since the Anglo-Saxon poet translated his source word for word, if we compare the wording of the Roman Psalter with the wording of the Anglo-Saxon poetic version, we may gain a great deal of insight into how the poet composed.[16]

[16]   Robert E. Diamond, *The Diction of the Anglo-Saxon Metrical Psalms* (= *Janua Linguarum, Series Practica*, 10) (The Hague: Mouton, 1963), p. 6.