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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A sound change that never was: *h*-loss and vowel lengthening in Old English

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Abstract

In the 1880s, Sievers proposed that in Old English words such as **feorhes*, the loss of the post-consonantal **h* caused compensatory lengthening of the vowel: *fēores.* Since there are no unambiguous traces of this sound change in later English, widespread analogical restitution of the short vowels was assumed (e.g. from *feorh*). The evidence for this lengthening is largely metrical. I argue that while Sievers is correct that words like <feores> often need to scan with a heavy initial syllable, this need not be explained by a general lengthening in the language at large. Indeed, the distribution of where heavy scansions are required in verse is typical for *metrical archaisms*: late prehistoric metrical values of words preserved for poetic convenience. Just as *wundor* 'marvel' can continue to be scanned as monosyllabic **wundr*, or contracted *hēan* can scan as disyllabic **hēahan*, so can light-syllabled *feores* continue to scan as heavy **feorhes.* The same sets of poems that prefer non-epenthesized or non-contracted forms also prefer the heavy scansions of *feores*-type words. If heavy scansions of *feores*-words are seen as a matter of poetic convention, then the hypothesis of compensatory lengthening in the language generally is left without evidence and should be rejected.

Keywords: Old English; compensatory lengthening; consonant deletion; metre; alliterative verse

1. Introduction

In the first edition of his influential *Angelsächsische Grammatik*, Eduard Sievers (1882: 73) outlined a well-known and uncontroversial sound change that took place in the early history of English:

> §218. I n l a u t e n d e s e i n f a c h e s *h* und altes *hw* vor vocalen schwindet. Treten dadurch vocale zusammen, so erfolgt meist contraction (§110 ff. 166). Beispiele: a) nach consonanten: *feorh* gen. *feores* u. ä. §242, *-feolan* §387 zu got. *filhan*; – b) nach vocalen: *feoh*, gen. *feós* §242, *heáh* pl. *heá* §295, anm. 1 etc.; ferner die verba contracta §373, wie *seón* sehen, got. *saihwan*, und vieles ähnliche.

Sievers here used an acute to mark vowel length: *e*, *eo* are short, *é*, *eó* long, etc. In this edition, in 1882, Sievers understood *h*-loss as involving quantitative changes only when it led to hiatus sequences that would be contracted. A few years later, in the second edition (Sievers

1886: 95), a further dimension of vowel lengthening had entered the picture (bold highlighting my own):

> §218. I n l a u t e n d e s e i n f a c h e s *h* und altes *hw* vor vocalen schwindet. **Geht dem *h* ein consonant voraus, so wird bei dem ausfalle des *h* der vorhergehende vocal gedehnt**: *feorh*, *mearh*, gen. *féores*, *méares* u. ä., §242, *snearh*, gen. *snéare* §256, 4; *-filhð* inf. *-féolan* §387. Nur ausnahmsweise erscheint auch kürze, wie *feores*, wahrscheinlich durch anlehnung an *feorh*, oder *þyrel* loch, neben *þýrel*, aus *þýrel – þyrles* für **þyrhil –*þyrhles.*

Aside from the purely notational change of now marking long diphthongs as *éo*, etc., instead of *eó*, this revised edition introduces a new sound change into Old English historical phonology: the compensatory lengthening of a short vowel in a **-V̆ChV-* context (in simplexes the only *C* possible is **r* or **l*), caused by the loss of the post-consonantal **h.* This sound change would go on to be enshrined in many of the standard historical grammars, including Luick (1921: 226–7), Campbell (1983: 104–5), Hogg (2011: 169–71, but see 171, 202 for reservations) and Ringe & Taylor (2014: 307–8). It has furthermore been accepted in a number of theoretical studies attempting to describe this intriguing type of compensatory lengthening using one or other phonological framework (Kim 2005, with references; Beltzung 2008: 187–8).

Something clearly took place in the fairly short space of time between the first and second editions of the *Grammatik* to give Sievers the idea that the vowels in *féores*, *méares*, etc. should be considered long. This something was his study of alliterative metrics. During the 1880s, Sievers was heavily occupied with working out a system for scanning alliterative verse forms in various early Germanic languages, with the main results appearing in a series of articles, especially Sievers (1885a,b,c, 1887); this system would later be summarized and codified in his well-known monograph (Sievers 1893). Near the beginning of the first of these articles, Sievers (1885b: 218) describes a 'eureka moment', so to speak, where he had a breakthrough in his understanding of the metrical form (bold highlighting again my own):

> Freilich habe ich – wenn ich soviel von der genesis der folgenden untersuchungen erzählen darf – dabei immer das unbehagliche gefühl gehabt, dass trotz aller freiheit doch ein bestimmtes rhythmisches etwas beim lesen durchklang, das eine genauere bestimmung verlangte, ohne dass ich jedoch eine solche in festen sätzen hätte geben können. Endlich lenkte mich ein äusserer anlass, wie ich glaube, auf die richtige bahn. **Eine mündliche mitteilung Kluge's über vocaldehnungen nach ausfall von *h* in wörtern wie *feorh – feóres*, die ich glaubte durch metrische gründe in anknüpfung an Rieger stützen zu können**, führte mich zu einer durchsicht der ags. dichtungen in bezug auf minimalverse, die über quantitäten und silbenzahl einzelner wortformen aufschluss geben könnten. Bei dieser zusammenhängenden scansionsarbeit traten mir nun gewisse früher wenig beachtete erscheinungen so lebhaft entgegen, dass ich nicht umhin konnte eine statistische untersuchung über den ags. versbau überhaupt anzuschliessen. Die resultate derselben ergaben denn, für mich überraschend genug, eine sehr nahe verwantschaft der ags. halbzeile mit dem nordischen viersilbler oder zeigen doch, wenn man das glaublicher findet, dass die freiheiten des ags. versbaues sich innerhalb weit engerer schranken bewegen, als man bisher angenommen.

This comment is of interest for at least three reasons. First, it pins down rather precisely the origin of the hypothesized sound change that I am primarily concerned with here, namely the compensatory lengthening upon loss of **h*, to an oral comment by Kluge sometime in the early 1880s. Secondly, it also demonstrates how intertwined this theory of compensatory

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lengthening was with metrical analysis. Thirdly, and much more generally, it drives home the extent to which Sievers' influential theory of metre was grounded in considerations of linguistic details of vowel quantity and syllable weight (Goering 2023: 26–8).[1]

In principle, a proposed quantitative sound change like this lengthening could be argued for using several sources of evidence. Best would be explicit and reliable indications of vowel length in contemporary texts (graphical or metalinguistic), but no such data is available for the present case. Failing that, later outcomes in either the ordinary lexicon or the onomasticon are often the most straightforward way to trace phonological developments. After a brief typological contextualization in section 2, these sources of information are reviewed in sections 3 and 4, but as we will see, they give little evidence of lengthening as a general process in Old English as a whole (though the onomastic evidence might suggest a limited regional development along these lines). The main source of evidence is still today, as it was for Sievers, metrical, and my main object in this piece is to reassess the verse data. In section 5 I review and affirm Sievers' findings about what syllables need to scan as heavy, but I part ways with him in section 6 by arguing that the distribution of supposedly lengthened forms in the corpus closely matches the typical distribution of metrical archaisms in general. I suggest that the scansion of a form like *feores* with a heavy initial syllable does not point to real phonological lengthening, but to an entrenched licence that allowed the form to continue to scan with its prehistoric value, **feorhes*, even once the **h* had been lost in the contemporary language – much as a word like *wundor* can continue to scan as a monosyllable (cf. older **wundr*) in verse.[2] If this analysis of the metrical evidence is accepted, then the evidence for this compensatory lengthening largely disappears. Some outstanding complications, chiefly involving the word *sweora* 'neck', are discussed at the end in section 7, before the data and argument are reviewed in the conclusion, section 8.

2. Typological context

Should Sievers' lengthening be accepted, it would be an example of a type of change that, while clearly possible, seems to be rather rare in the languages of the world. Compensatory lengthenings in general are well known (see in particular Beltzung 2008; Gess 2011), but the usual sort involves loss of a consonant directly after a vowel. This variety of lengthening is exemplified repeatedly in the (pre)history of English, and a well-known example is the so-called Nasalspirantengesetz of the Ingvaeonic languages,[3] whereby a coda nasal before a voiceless fricative was lost, with compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel:

> Proto-Germanic **munþaz* 'mouth' > Ingvaeonic **mūþ* > Old English *mūþ*, Old Saxon *mūð*, Old Frisian *mūth* (contrast Old High German *mund*, Old Low Franconian *munt*, *mund-*)

The change Sievers proposed in the second edition of his grammar is different, in that the lost consonant is not immediately adjacent to the lengthened vowel. This sort of change seems to be fairly rare, with only a handful of apparent examples documented in the phonological literature. That the change is typologically possible has, however, never been in the slightest doubt, since it happens to be found in certain dialects of Ancient Greek (Kavitskaya 2001: 47–52, with references):

[1] Sievers' framework, though modified in some respects – almost no one now takes his foot divisions seriously, for instance – remains the standard point of reference for all mainstream metrical theories. See Terasawa (2011) and Goering (2020, 2023, appendix E, 2024) for details and references.

[2] 'Prehistoric' here means the forms that were usual in the period just before the earliest written texts of Old English, and before the sound changes here under discussion began to apply in any variety of Old English.

[3] That is, Old English, Old Frisian and Old Saxon.

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**ksénwos* 'guest, stranger' (cf. Mycenaean *ke-se-nu-wo-*) > Ionic *ksẽinos*, Doric *ksenwos*, *ksēnos* (contrast Attic *ksĕ́nos*, with no lengthening)

Given the prestige of Greek and its former familiarity to most Western linguists, the process is well documented and the possibility of such a change cannot be in doubt. A few other comparable examples have been gleaned over the years, including at least from Akkadian, Coptic, Kasem and Persian (H. H. Hock 1986: 438–9; Beltzung 2008: 182–5). Beltzung (2008: 187–8) would, on the strength of the standard grammars of Old English, add post-consonantal *h*-loss to this catalogue. Arguing against this change, as I do here, will not have any sweeping typological implications: the change already appears to be very rare (Beltzung 2008: 5 and *passim*, labels it 'exotique'), and rejecting it in Old English would merely make it slightly rarer still. The question is essentially about the particular case, not the general phenomenon.

3. Later English evidence

Dietz (1970: 3) lists 39 simplex elements with probable *-*V̆ChV*- sequences either in some forms or throughout their paradigms. This list does not include former compounds, many of which are somewhat uncertain and may have behaved differently from simplexes.[4] Many of the relevant words simply do not survive into later English. Those that do generally show a short vowel.

Two examples can show the typical developments. First is *sē olh* 'seal', plural *sĕ́olas.* The modern form of the word is based on the plural, with loss of **h*, but the vocalism does not represent [x]*sēolas.* Old English *ēo* would have, via long [ø:], become close long *ē̞* in Middle English (J. Wright & E. M. Wright 1923: 32–3), but such evidence as is available, including the later orthography and Levins' rhyme-listing (Wheatley 1867: 207, line 19), points rather to an open *ɛ̄*. This suggests that when open-syllable lengthening took place in Middle English, the input was a short *e*, which regularly lengthened to open long *ɛ̄* (J. Wright & E. M. Wright 1923: 41). It is of course theoretically possible that the vocalism was taken from endingless *seolh*, and the consonantism from inflected *sēolas*, etc., but this kind of contradictory analogy is, while by no means impossible, a rather strained proposition.

In a second example, *moru* 'carrot, root vegetable', no analogical explanations seem to be available. This is a feminine *ō*-stem, from Proto-Germanic **morhō*, with the **h* evidenced by Old Saxon *morha* 'parsnip',[5] as well as by a variety of forms in later German. This word is never found with *h* in English, so if lengthening did take place, it ought to have affected the entire paradigm, yet the quality of the vowel in later English unambiguously points to a short *o*. In Middle English there were three distinct varieties of *ō*: close *ō̞* from Old English

[4] For example, if *īfeg* 'ivy' comes from **iβ-hēg*, then it would seem to show compensatory lengthening of the first syllable (Hogg 2011: 170–1); note that modern *ivy* points to an Old English long *ī*, since later open-syllable lengthening would have produced *ē*, as in *evil*, *beetle*, etc. But this form is perhaps best taken as an original simplex (Krahe & Meid 1967: 189), and the length variation could be due to some other cause, such as old ablaut variation between **ei-* and **i-* (I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the etymological problems with this example). In the word families of *ōrett* 'battle', from **uz-hatja-*, and in *ōnettan* 'hasten', from **an-hettan*, evidence for lengthening come from the quality of the vowel, but there are no reflexes of these words in later English to confirm this. Against these two forms, lengthening seems to fail in *eofot*, *ebhāt** (from *Épinal-Erfurt* 854) < **eβ-hāt-* 'guilt, sin' and *eofolsian** < **eβ-hālsian* 'blaspheme'. The evidence is again based on the vocalism (the occurrence of back umlaut). Ringe & Taylor (2014: 308, with references) explain these forms by suggesting that '*h was lost after a voiced obstruent without effect on any adjacent sound'. In any case, I like most others, do not see any need to treat compounds and simplexes in parallel, and I will set the compounds aside from here on.

[5] In the glossary in Trier Codex 40, glossing *Pertinaca* for *Pastinaca*; see Steinmeyer & Sievers (1879, 42, entry 32), cf. Tiefenbach (2010: 279).

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long $\bar{o}$, open $\bar{o}_1$ from Old English long $\bar{a}$ (this rounding did not occur in all dialects), and a distinct open $\bar{o}_2$, from Old English short *o* via open-syllable lengthening (J. Wright & E. M. Wright 1923: 27–8, 39–40). The modern form *more* shows clearly enough that it is not from close $\bar{o}$, which would have given [x]*moor*, and its quality as specifically secondarily lengthened $\bar{o}_2$ is rather nicely seen in a stanza from Chaucer. In *Troilus & Criseyde*, book V, lines 22–6, Chaucer alternates $\bar{o}_1$ and $\bar{o}_2$ (the rhyme scheme is rigidly ABABB for these lines):[6]

This Troilus, withouten reed or **loore**, [< lāre][7]
As man that hath his joies ek for**lore**, [< forlŏren]
Was waytyng on his lady evere **more**, [< māre]
As she that was the sothfast crop and **more** [< mŏru]
Of al his lust or joies hereto**fore**. [< tōfŏran]

'This Troilus, without counsel or instruction, like someone who has also lost his joys, was attending on his lady ever more, because she was true bloom and root [i.e. be all, end all] of all his pleasure and joys before this.'

Since *more* 'root' rhymes with the reflexes of *forloren* and *beforan* in a stanza carefully employing the finest of rhyme distinctions, the vowel would seem to be securely from Old English short ŏ, not old $\bar{o}$ > $\bar{o}$. If loss of **h* caused early lengthening, whence this short vowel?

Among words in the ordinary lexicon, the only potential evidence for compensatory lengthening comes from *swĕora* 'neck', which interestingly also has an exceptional long vowel in Norse, where compensatory lengthening by and large demonstrably did not take place (Myrvoll 2015: 21). This special case will be discussed separately in section 7.

If only ordinary lexical evidence were considered, it seems highly unlikely that the idea of compensatory lengthening in this context would have been accepted. The evidence for it is very poor (consisting of a single, problematic word), while all other words for which any evidence exists point the other way. Although Dietz (1970) argues in support of lengthening as a change, I would refer to his own careful review of the non-onomastic evidence for a detailed demonstration of how poorly it supports the idea of compensatory lengthening.

4. Onomastic evidence

By and large, place-name evidence points the same way as the ordinary lexical evidence: compensatory lengthening is almost entirely absent. This was noted by Smith (1956: 243–4), and largely confirmed in the exacting review by Dietz (1970). Dietz (1970: 6–25; see 25 for a summary), however, does find a very limited number of forms in place names that do seem to reflect lengthening, and his final paragraph argues in favour of Sievers' sound change. I confess to finding his conclusion rather startling, particularly since most of his positive evidence (and all that would carry real conviction) comes from the Southwest, at best providing support for a regionally restricted lengthening.

The only example considered clear by Dietz (1970: 22–4) from outside the Southwest is *Snargate* in Kent, which shows early spellings like *Snergathe*, *Sneregate*, etc.[8] This is often held to be the same word as English *snare*, attested once as Old English *snearan*, and with the **h* securely shown by Old High German *stnarchon* (*sic*; cf. Seebold *et al.* 2008: 778), and related

[6] Cited from Benson (1987: 560).

[7] Old English *lār*, with secondary *-e* < *-u* extended as a feminine marker.

[8] See the *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *snāre* 4: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED41168/track?counter=1&search_id=2337493.

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verbs such as *insnerahan*, but it is not clear that this Kentish place name actually contains this element. Other roots, such as *snēr* (attested as 'string', with the basic sense probably being something that is woven; cf. Gothic *snōrjō** '(woven) basket', Norse *snóri* 'twisted rope, fishing line'), might perhaps instead lie behind this name. And in general, caution is called for when dealing with essentially obscure name elements of this sort, where the semantics of all proposed etymons would seem to bear a rather strained and arbitrary relationship to the place in question. By contrast, the Southwestern evidence consists of much more normal and transparent elements, namely forms of *healh* and *sealh* that show fronted reflexes (as would be normal for *ēa*, but not for *ĕa*).

It is also worth emphasizing that the word Dietz chooses for the title of his article, *Wĕalas* 'the Welsh, Wales', never once occurs with a clearly lengthened form, and must largely reflect a short vowel (Smith 1956: 143; Dietz 1970: 25). Only with open-syllable lengthening in the Middle English period did *Wăles* finally become long-vowelled *Wāles.* One might imagine analogical influence from the singular *Wealh*, though as with *seal*, this would be accompanied by retention of the plural's consonantism without *h.* As Smith (1956: 243) puts it, discussing *Wales* but with an eye towards the larger lexicon and onomasticon:

> it is remarkable that this restoration of short vowels was everywhere so complete that nowhere in ME or ModE is there a single trace of this supposed lengthening.

Even if a regional qualification to the 'nowhere' is in order, following Dietz's evidence, the short vowels of *Wales* and other place names speak largely against rather than for lengthening in the vast majority of English dialects.

5. Metrical evidence

If the lexical evidence for compensatory lengthening after post-consonantal *h*-loss is virtually nonexistent, with more and better examples against than for, and the onomastic evidence is almost entirely limited to a fairly small area in the Southwest, then why has this sound change found its way into well over a century's worth of historical grammars? The answer lies in Sievers' discussion quoted in section 1: metre. In particular, Sievers (1885b: 218) noted that evidence for *h*-loss could, it would seem, be provided by MINIMALVERSE, half-lines with the minimum amount of linguistic material needed to be valid.[9]

The metrical issues can be illustrated with *Beowulf* 1293a:[10]

> feore beorgan
> 'to save (his) life'

This line is perfectly clear in the manuscript (folio 158v, line 6), and under no suspicion of being corrupt. At first glance, it might appear to be a rather typical sort of trochaic line that appears thousands of times in the poem, but if the vowel is taken to be short – *fĕore beorgan* – there is a problem: the first syllable, *feo-*, is LIGHT. A light syllable ends in a short vowel or a short diphthong,[11] while a heavy syllable ends in anything else: a consonant, a long vowel, or a long diphthong. Note that a single intervocalic consonant goes in the second syllable, not

[9] The terms VERSE and HALF-LINE are synonymous. They refer to the paired rhythmical units that, when bound together by alliteration, form the Old English long line.

[10] Citations from *Beowulf* are my own, edited from the manuscript for convenience (with the addition of length marks, regularized word division and capitalization, expansion of the tironian note as *and*, etc.). Examples are generally editorially unproblematic, but in case of any doubt the apparatus and commentary of Fulk, Bjork & Niles (2008) should be consulted. High-quality images of the original manuscript and early transcripts, accompanied by annotations (e.g. of ultraviolet readings), can be found in Kiernan (2015).

[11] It is worth emphasizing that this is not a mistake: short diphthongs are monomoraic in Old English.

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the first, hence *feo-re.* At least after short vowels, a consonant cluster is always split between syllables, as in *beor-gan.* For details and references, see Goering (2023: 7–11).

Instead of *feo-*, comparable trochaic verses of just four syllables – one of the 'minimal' patterns of the metrical form – almost always begin with a heavy syllable. A typical example is 1303a:

cūþe folme
'the famous hand'

Here *cū-þe*, with its long root vowel, starts with a heavy syllable. Even without committing to a specific metrical formalism,[12] the generalization that so excited Sievers is clear: a metrically minimal verse in Old English must have four syllables, and the first of those four syllables to be stressed and take part in the alliteration must, as a strong rule, be a heavy syllable. Only a very few verses even superficially fail to conform to this generalization, and a large chunk of those that appear to violate it can be remedied by the assumption of compensatory lengthening. In this instance, *feore* is the very word Sievers (1885b: 218, 1886: 95) used to illustrate the proposed sound change: it comes historically from **feorhǣ* (Old Saxon *ferhe*, etc.), and if the vowel did indeed lengthen, then the resulting *fēore* would fit its metrical context without any problem:

fēore beorgan

There is no doubt that Sievers is broadly right in noting that *feore*, if understood as having a light syllable, would be unmetrical. He is also right that in 11 instances in *Beowulf* alone, similarly anomalous verses occur with words that all have a historical *h* after the medial consonant (see the appendix). Adopting his sound change would be one way to render all these verses metrical at a stroke.

An important complication, already described in detail by Sievers (1885c: 487–9), comes not from any challenge to the metrical system, but from a clear variability in how words like *feore* are used metrically. Even though forms like *feore* often need to scan with a heavy syllable, there are verses where the metre demands a light syllable instead. Take, for example, *Beowulf* 1843a:

on swā geongum feore
'in so young a life, at such a young stage of life'

Here the metre requires *fe̅ore*, not *fēore.* The rhythmical pattern *wwSwSw* (*w* = a weak syllable, *S* a heavy, stressed syllable) is strikingly avoided in Old English metre, with potential parallels being effectively limited to hypermetric passages.[13] This verse will only scan if

[12] Sievers himself would say that a minimal verse consists of four metrical positions, two of which must be lifts. A lift, at least when verse-initial or following fully unstressed linguistic material, cannot be filled by a light stressed syllable on its own. But even if one does not accept Sievers' four-position principle, his empirical observations regarding syllable weight and stress are sound. For details on Old English metrical theories, on their empirical basis and on the unmetrical status of three-position verses, see Goering (2023: 24–39, 243–56, with references).

[13] On hypermetric verses, see Hartman (2020). Occasionally, patterns reminiscent of this are found in normal verses through anacrusis: when unstressed, extrametrical syllables are added to an already complete verse. But the constraints on anacrusis are strict, requiring (in the on-verse) both double alliteration and either an expanded dip or a word break after the first lift, and with the extrametrical syllables themselves being almost entirely limited to verbal prefixes or the negative particle *ne* (Cable 1971; Duncan 1985: 82–5); 1843a would, if scanned with lengthened *fēore*, be anomalous on each of these points.

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the two syllables of *feore* are counted together as a single metrical element, equivalent to a single heavy syllable. This process, called resolution, is central to Sievers' description of Old English metre, and remains a key part of all mainstream metrical formalisms to this day (Goering 2020, 2023: 26–8, 37–9).[14]

With resolution, 1843a will scan as *wwSwS̆w* = *wSwS*, effectively identical to the pattern exemplified by 1844b:[15]

and on mōde frōd
'and wise in spirit'

Both half-lines are of Sievers' type B, a very common and well-paralleled configuration of linguistic material in verse texts.

For Sievers, this double behaviour of forms of *feorh* would point to ongoing analogy. In 1293a, *fēores* would have its historically regular lengthened form, while in 1843a, *fĕore* would have restored the short root vowel on analogy with endingless *feorh.* To see both forms side-by-side would either mean that the analogical levelling was ongoing, or that poets actively exploited linguistic variability beyond its normal bounds for metrical convenience.

This last possibility – that poets retained linguistic variants for metrical convenience – is, I believe, on the right track, but it also suggests a simpler analysis of the situation that involves no linguistic lengthening at all. Sievers is certainly correct about when *feore(s)* and similar words need to have heavy initial syllables, and when they need to have light ones, but, I suggest, lengthening of the vowels is neither the only nor the best way of fitting in heavy syllables where they are needed.

6. Metrical archaisms

When looking at a verse like 1293a, *feore beorgan*, there are potentially two ways of characterizing the metrical problem. One is to say that *feore* needs to scan as if it had a long vowel. The other, more accurate way is to say that *feore* needs to scan as if it had a heavy initial syllable. As described in section 5, there are two ways for a syllable to be heavy in Old English: one is indeed for it to contain a long vowel, but the other is for it to end in a consonant. The latter option was the case in the pre-loss form of *feore*, namely **feor-hǣ*, in which I have marked the syllable boundary with a hyphen. The initial syllable, **feor-*, ends in a consonant, and so is heavy. In other words, a simpler way of describing 1293a is to just say that is scanned as if the older, pre-loss form were still present.

If the problem is reframed this way, it no longer appears as an isolated issue to be solved by proposing a new sound change, but instead aligns with the well-established phenomenon of METRICAL ARCHAISMS in Old English verse.[16] In the present context, a metrical archaism may be

[14] Resolution is somewhat complicated by the fact that it can be suspended: when a lift immediately follows a heavy, stressed syllable, it may consist of a single light syllable. In *Beowulf*, at least, suspension of resolution is rather strictly governed by Kaluza's law; see Goering (2023: ch. 5, with references). This matter is not immediately relevant, except that it means that in some verses there is no evidence for syllable weight: in a suspension context, a lift could be either light or heavy. There are also other contexts (such as when an expanded dip could potentially follow the word in question) where it may not be clear whether or not resolution has taken place.

[15] The number of weak syllables at the start is variable and not regulated metrically. In a four-position framework, these would be regarded as expanded or protracted dips.

[16] This explanation was in some ways anticipated by Smith (1956: 243–4), who argued that 'the metrical evidence upon which the theory of lengthening was based is of doubtful value, for the rhythmical patterns of OE verse, like the word patterns, had become traditional'. I think Smith is essentially correct, though this brief formulation needs rather substantial qualification. A verse form being 'traditional' is irrelevant, and the implication that the metrical form itself is somehow to be doubted does not seem warranted. The key point is that the 'word patterns' were

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roughly defined as an older phonological form whose prosodic shape is optionally retained in poetry after it has become rare or obsolete in the spoken language. A relatively simple case concerns vowel epenthesis, where former monosyllables like **wundr*, ending in a sequence of rising sonority, gain a second syllable to become disyllabic, in this case *wundor.*[17] In *Beowulf*, words like *wundor* must, regardless of how they are spelled in the late manuscript, scan 22 times as monosyllables, and 5 times as disyllables (Fulk 1992: 78–9, 83).

An even closer parallel comes from intervocalic *h*-loss. In words like **hēahan* 'high (weak oblique)', the **h* disappears very shortly after the earliest written texts in English, and the resulting hiatus sequence is usually contracted to monosyllabic *hēan.* In verse, *hēan* (and the many similar words) may scan either as one or two syllables.[18] A monosyllabic scansion is required, for instance, in *Beowulf* 713b (also 1984b; virtually identical too are 929b and 1016b):

in sele þām hēan
'in that high hall'

This scans as *wSwS* (with *sele* resolved by rule), and taking *hēan* as disyllabic would spoil the metre. But in 116a, the contracted form found in the manuscript is unmetrical:

hēan hūses
'the high building'

Here the more archaic **hēahan* – a disyllable with a heavy root syllable – must be understood in order to obtain a metrically minimal verse.

It is already the standard view that uncontracted forms like **hēahan* can retain their prehistoric shapes as metrical archaisms in poetry composed after *h*-loss and contraction had taken place (Sievers 1885c: 478–9, 1893: 123; Fulk 1992: 94–104; Hutcheson 1995: 41–5; Terasawa 2011: 52–3). My suggestion is simply that there is no difference between intervocalic and post-consonantal *h*-loss in this regard.[19] In both cases, a linguistic change took place, but in poetry, we must sometimes (but not always) scan words as if it had not. In other

indeed 'traditional'. My argument depends partly on specifying the 'traditional' nature of such words more precisely under the rubric of metrical archaisms, and partly in making the empirical case that this phenomenon corresponds well to the distributions of other metrical archaisms in the poetic corpus.

[17] Strictly speaking, it is difficult to know whether, for any given variety of Old English at any given moment, the second syllable truly involved an epenthetic vowel, or if the liquid (or in other cases, nasal) had become syllabic.

[18] On the behaviour of contracted words with a light first syllable, such as **sehan* > *sēon*, see Fulk (1992: 92–4). Note that there is no evidence that such words ever underwent lengthening.

[19] The only potential difference is that in forms like *hēan*, there is more potential for morphological restoration of the contracted syllables (or perhaps even the morphologically motivated blocking of contraction in the first place, as suggested by Quirk 1968). Contracted forms are found graphically indicated sporadically in various Anglian texts, with the bulk in late Northumbrian, where forms such as *fōa* 'grab, take' are common (Hogg 2011: 172–82, esp. 179). This dialectal variation suggests either that (some varieties of?) Northumbrian resisted contraction, or that these varieties were eventually particularly prone to morphological restoration of the syllables lost through contraction. As it happens, the evidence of contraction after intervocalic *h*-loss generally aligns reasonably well with other dating criteria, which should mean either that dialects that resisted contraction are poorly represented in the surviving poetic corpus, or that morphological restoration became really widespread only after the latest Northumbrian poems were composed. In other words, the potential danger here is that morphological pressures could make decontracted forms more common in younger poems than would be expected from the conservativeness of poetic tradition alone, but there is no actual evidence that this is the case. This aligns well with the evidence from spelling, which indicates that, in the majority of attested dialects, decontracted forms were unusual and sporadic. I would like to thank one of the reviewers for drawing my attention to this point in general, and to Quirk's article in particular.

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words, I suggest that **feorhæ* linguistically became *feore*,[20] with no lengthening of the short root vowel, but that poets could continue to use it as if it still had an *h*, making the initial syllable heavy.

Even without going any further, this would seem to be a more economical suggestion than proposing a sound change that would have to be completely undone (sometimes by analogy, sometimes by obscure means, as in *moru*) by the time of Middle English. But it is possible to go further, and I will now try and show that the distribution in verse of where words like *feore* need to have heavy initial syllables is typical of where metrical archaisms are employed in Old English as a whole.

The bulk of Old English poetry is preserved in manuscripts from the later tenth and very early eleventh centuries.[21] It is clear, however, that most, probably all,[22] of the surviving poetry has been copied from earlier written versions. The poems preserved in these manuscripts are very likely of diverse origins, both chronologically and dialectally.

Instances of metrical archaisms – most frequently examples of non-epenthesis and non-contraction after intervocalic *h*-loss – are distributed unevenly across the corpus. Much of the relevant data is discussed by Amos (1980: 40–63, 70–91), and reviewed and corrected by Fulk (1992: 66–121). Both examine poems one-by-one, but the important trends can be more clearly seen by dividing the corpus into three groups. Fulk (1992: 61) adopts, and largely affirms (Fulk 1992: 348–51), a scheme of relative chronology from Cable (1981: 79–80) for a number of the longer and/or more securely dateable Old English poems, which can be roughly sorted into an early group (generally assumed to be from the later seventh or eighth century, though the details are not immediately relevant for my purposes), a middle group (perhaps roughly from the ninth century) and a late group (including several securely dateable poems from the tenth and eleventh centuries). The poems that Fulk places with reasonable confidence into these groups are as follows (separate discussions of poems in Fulk's appendix are noted in brackets):

Early Group: *Bede's Death Song*, *Beowulf*, *Cædmon's Hymn*, *Christ C* (Fulk 1992: 397–9), *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Genesis A*, *Guthlac A* (Fulk 1992: 399–400), *Leiden Riddle.*

Middle Group: *Andreas*, *Guthlac B* (Fulk 1992: 400–2), *Phoenix* (Fulk 1992: 402–4), the works of Cynewulf: *Elene*, *Fates of the Apostles*, *Juliana*, *Christ B* (Fulk 1996: 15–19).

Late Group: *Battle of Maldon*, *Durham*, *Judith*, *Metres of Boethius*, *Pastoral Care (Preface and Epilogue)*, the poems of the *Old English Annals*: *Battle of Brunanburh*, *Capture of the Five Boroughs*, *Coronation of Edgar*, *Death of Edward.*[23]

Table 1 draws on the work of Amos (1980: 37–9), as revised by Fulk (1992: 141–5), to present an overview of the data on post-consonantal *h*-loss; the full data is provided in the appendix. The distribution of this phenomenon is compared with contraction after intervocalic *h*-loss

[20] Or, to be precise, that **feorhæ* became **feoræ*, which was probably the normal form in the time of the *Beowulf*-poet. By later vowel reduction, this became *feore*, which is what our later manuscripts transmit. I gloss over these details for the sake of clarity.

[21] The classic edition of the corpus is Krapp & Dobbie (1953), and a convenient digital version is available through *CLASP*: https://clasp.ell.ox.ac.uk/db-latest/poem/

[22] I am unaware of evidence to suggest that any Old English poem survives in its first written form.

[23] I have omitted the *Metrical Psalms* from the main discussion, due to their unusually great metrical uncertainties. They do contain an unusual number of what look like heavy scansions of *feore*, mostly in the set phrase *tō feore* 'forever' (5x: 51.8 2b, 54.22 2b, 60.3 1b, 101.25 3b and 132.4 2b). There is besides these one reasonably good example of a heavy, non-formulaic *feore* at 68.1 2a (the only other potential heavy example, 68.10 1a, is ambiguous, since resolution would give type A3-, a clearly valid pattern in the *Psalms*). The *Psalms* also contain 5 examples that, if scanned by the classical norms, would have to have light forms of *feore*: 54.23 3a, 71.17 2a, 88.26 1a, 88.27 1a and 106.8 3b.

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Table 1. Metrical archaisms in Old English verse

	*feorhǣ			*hēahan			*wundr		
	Old	Young	%Old	Old	Young	%Old	Old	Young	%Old
Early	26	8	76.5%	76	25	75.2%	69	31	69%
Middle	2	9	18.2%	4	25	13.8%	9	83	11%
Late	1	2	33.3%	2	10	16.7%	8	27	22.9%
Non-Early	3	11	21.4%	6	35	14.6%	17	100	14.5%

and epenthesis. In each category, the column *old* counts instances where the linguistically more archaic scansion – as the types **feorhǣ*, **hēahan* and **wundr*, respectively – is required, and the column *young* counts scansions with the linguistically innovative forms – the types of *fĕore*, *hēan* and *wundor*.[24] The column *%old* simply recalculates these two columns into percentages: the higher the percentage, the more that group of poems prefers the metrical archaisms for that category of word. Note that a fair number of forms are ambiguous, since the flexibility of Old English metre can often accommodate either an older or a younger form. These ambiguous cases are set aside. All numbers are, of course, approximations only, since editorial decisions (or improved knowledge of metrical nuances) can easily affect the scansion.

Two general comments on the data are in order. Firstly, forms of *fĭras* 'men' were excluded by both Amos and Fulk, since this form is never clearly short anywhere in the corpus.[25] I would regard it as the most firmly entrenched of the metrical archaisms considered here. Secondly, following Fulk (1992: 143–4), instances of the formula *tō wīdan fĕore* (and its closest variants) have been considered ambiguous, since they could represent a

[24] The numbers are taken from Fulk (1992: 66–121), with regular reference back to Amos (1980: 40–63, 70–91). I have further adjusted Fulk's numbers somewhat, often with reference to his own notes and comments; I give an overview of the deviations here. For post-consonantal *h*-loss, relevant forms of *fĕolan* seem to have been generally overlooked (except for *Guthlac A* 626b): these are *Daniel* 559a, *Genesis A* 43a; *Christ B* 668a, *Elene* 196a and 497a, *Juliana* 417a; and *Metrical Psalm* 72.14 1b. These forms are analogical, and their exclusion may be due to the assumption that the past participle in particular is modelled on the past participles of class 4 strong verbs (thus Hogg & Fulk 2011: 234), but *Daniel* 559a scans with a heavy syllable, suggesting that the analogy has instead consisted of the extension of **h* at the expense of the Verner's variant **g*. The number of non-ambiguous scansions of this root are small, and their exclusion would not affect the overall picture. For contraction, the examples where Fulk (1992: 97, note 5) notes that *hēan* and similar forms must be uncontracted are counted this way, not as ambiguous (since they are hardly so). *Beowulf* 881a has been counted as showing non-contraction as well. *Elene* 197a has been set aside since, as Fulk (1992: 99, note 7) himself remarks, 197a is generally emended and so too textually insecure to count as anything but ambiguous. I have treated *Elene* 674a as ambiguous, since it will scan just fine with or without contraction, though I suspect it really is contracted here (parallel to 1242a). For parasiting, the counts combine the presentations of stems in *-r*, *-m* and *-n* by Fulk (1992: 76–83) with the separate listing of stems in *-l* on pages 84–5. His table on p. 83 also undercounts *Daniel*, presumably by missing that 378a contains (however it is scanned) two separate non-epenthetic forms. *Exodus* 391b is set aside, since even with epenthesis the verse does not scan. Furthermore, there are a number of forms Fulk does not include in his tables, but only mentions in footnotes, many of which are fully secure. Fulk was perhaps justified in being cautious about Terasawa's law (Terasawa 1989, 1994: 8–15), for instance, since it was so newly proposed at the time, but to omit the data now would seem like an unwarranted distortion of the metrical evidence.

[25] I give the relevant verses here (ambiguous cases are marked with an asterisk). Early: *Cædmon's Hymn* 9a, *Beowulf* 91a*, 2001, 2250b*, 2286a, 2741b*, *Exodus* 396a*, *Christ C* 1592a (4 heavy, 4 ambiguous). Middle: *Andreas* 24a*, 160a*, 291a*, 409b, 590b, 920b*, 961a*, 980a*, 1286a*, *Christ B* 610b*, *Guthlac B* 864a, 988a, 1250b, *Phoenix* 3a*, 396b, 492a, 535b, *Elene* 897b, 1077a*, 1172a*, *Juliana* 218b, 240b*, 509b (11 heavy, 12 ambiguous). Late: *Judith* 24a, 33b, *Metres of Boethius* 4 39b, 7 11b, 8 32a, 19 2b* (5 heavy, 1 ambiguous). There is one instance in the *Psalms*, 134.3 2b (1 heavy).

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fairly trivial updating of a verse without the preposition.[26] If these verses were added back in, and scanned according to their apparent manuscript values, they would give the early group as having 12 young forms instead of 8 (70.3 per cent old),[27] and the middle group as having 15 young forms (11.2 per cent old).[28]

There is a sharp and obvious dichotomy between, on the one hand, the early group, and on the other, the middle and late groups. As a whole, the early poems prefer to use metrical archaisms, at a rate of around 7 out of every 10 instances where the metre tells us which form is used. Individual poems vary more, unsurprisingly, but poems in the early group almost always prefer all three types of metrical archaism considered here at a rate of at least 50 per cent,[29] while among the middle and late groups, the use of metrical archaisms of any given type rarely rises above 1 in every 3 secure instances.[30] The picture for all three types of metrical archaism seems much the same: an early period where the archaisms were preferred (though younger forms were sometimes used),[31] giving way to a later period in which the more normal linguistic forms predominated and metrical archaisms became a minority option.[32]

Under Sievers' view of post-consonantal *h*-loss as causing a real lengthening of the preceding vowel, it would be surprising to see the distribution of lengthened forms matching that of poetic archaisms so well. We would have to assume one of two things. One possibility would be that the progress of the analogical spread of short-vowelled forms proceeded at essentially the same pace as the decline of poetic archaisms in verse. While not strictly impossible, this seems like an unlikely coincidence. The other possibility is that analogical shortening had fully run its course, leaving the lengthened forms as metrical archaisms retained in verse. But if so, then what is the evidence for lengthening in the first place? Why appeal to a supposed intermediate stage **fēore* to justify scansions with a heavy

[26] But verses like *and þæs tō wīdan feore* (*Andreas* 810a), which require more radical reworking to scan with heavy *feore*, are taken at face value.

[27] The additional verses are *Beowulf* 933b, *Exodus* 548b and *Christ C* 1543a.

[28] The six verses in question are *Andreas* 106a, 1452a, *Guthlac B* 840a, and *Elene* 211a, 1288b, 1321b.

[29] The one exception is *Exodus*, where younger *wundor*-type forms predominate (8 of 10 instances). This poem has often been treated as transitional between the old and middle groups (cf. the table in Fulk 1992: 61).

[30] The exceptions are post-consonantal *h*-loss in *Juliana* (2 examples, 191b, 508b, both heavy), and vowel epenthesis in *Maldon* (1 secure example, monosyllabic, at 130b) and *Brunanburh* (epenthesis in 14b, but not in 3b). *Juliana* is by Cynewulf, and if his whole corpus is considered together, he shows the following trends: for the **feorhǣ*-type, he uses 2 old and 3 young forms (40%), for **hēahan* he has 1 old and 11 young (8.3% old), and for parasiting he very rarely employs metrical archaisms, with just 1 old form and 31 young (3.1% old). If the *Metrical Psalms* are considered and scanned as best they can be (compare note 23), they would actually slightly favour **feorhǣ*-forms, 7 against 5 (58.3%), though 5 of the heavy forms occur in the set adverbial phrase *tō feore* 'forever' (the light forms are also largely in set phrases).

[31] It would, of course, be interesting if any of the poems in the early group showed only forms scanning as if **h* were still present, since that could suggest that such a poem was simply composed before *h*-loss took place. As can be seen from the data in the appendix, however, the only poem that might seem compatible with this is *Exodus* (three archaic forms, one ambiguous formula), and this poem is, as just mentioned in note 29, generally instead placed at the *younger* end of the early group, due to its preference for epenthetic *wundor*-forms. The long poem with the greatest claim to age is *Genesis A*, which has two old forms and two young forms. It seems that even the oldest of the long poems was composed after the loss of post-consonantal **h*.

[32] The same point can be made by looking at the data from a different angle. The counts above take in some 407 forms, of which 197 (48.4%) show a more archaic form in scansion. Of these 197 metrical archaisms, 171 (86.8%) occur in the 'early' group. It is true that this group is large, but it only includes 235 (57.7%) of the relevant data points. If metrical archaisms were distributed evenly across the corpus, the 'early' group would contain only about 114 archaic forms (instead of 197), with the other two groups containing a combined 83 (instead of the 26 they actually show). Focusing in on post-consonantal *h*-loss, 26 of 29 (89.7%) archaic scansions from the poems considered here occur in the 'early' group, a rate closely paralleling that of metrical archaisms as a whole.

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syllable, instead of appealing directly to **feorhǣ*, the same way that disyllabic scansions of *hēan* rest directly on old **hēahan*?

The simpler explanation is that poets knew and remembered that *feore* could scan with its pre-loss form, as an optional metrical convention. They knew these archaic metrical values through, I would assume, exposure to other poems, creating a partly self-sustaining system of convention.[33] Before a certain point, poets strongly preferred the more archaic forms, but these eventually became a minority, preserved especially in set expressions. This kind of decline in the use of metrical archaisms is, of course, not surprising.[34]

I leave it open how poets, especially older poets, actually pronounced the forms in question.[35] Did they simply retain the historical *h*-sounds (i.e. [x])? Did they substitute some other sound as a place holder, such as [ʔ] or [h]? Did they adopt an artificial syllabification, such as *feor-es*, for the sake of performance, as suggested by Hogg (2011: 169)? Did they use the younger pronunciation, and simply understand the mismatch with metrical form to be a legitimate licence? Or, perhaps, did they actually lengthen the vowel of the root syllable, saying *fēore*, as a way of maintaining the proper syllable weight? I would emphasize that the last option is a reasonable possibility – but under the view argued for here it would be entirely limited to the recitation of poetry, a feature of performance, and never part of the ordinary language.

7. A nick in the neck: *sweora*

The word that, at first glance, might seem to provide the most consistent evidence for lengthening is *sweora* 'neck'. This is often supposed to go back to a Proto-Germanic form **swerhijan-*, with reflexes attested only in Norse *svíri* and its descendants, and in Old English *sweora*, *swiora*, *swyra*, *swira*, *swura*, also found in Middle English. Wider cognates usually adduced include German *Schwirre* '(fence) stake', Latin *sūrus* 'post, stake', *surculus* 'sprig, stick' and Vedic *sváru-* 'sacrificial stake' (Holthausen 1974: 537; Vries 1977: 571; Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989: 1005). Also possibly relevant is a distinct Old English word, *swer*, *swyr*, dative plural *swiorum* 'column, pillar'.

The etymology of *sweora* is beset with problems. First is the English-internal evidence, which has been generally fully treated by Dietz (1970: 19–22). There is metrical evidence from the *Metres of Boethius* for heaviness in two verses:

swāre on þā swyran (9 56a)
mid ēowrum swiran (10 19a)

[33] A tradition of explicit instruction in such matters cannot, of course, be entirely ruled out, though there is no evidence for it.

[34] It is worth noting that the retention of the archaic pronunciations is not, as far as can now be determined, a matter of simply repeating rigid formulas, since examples of metrical archaisms in late poems are by no means exact echoes or even very close variations on phrases found elsewhere in the corpus. See in particular *Juliana* 191b and *Maldon* 239b, both given in the appendix.

[35] One of the reviewers points out that there is an interesting rumination on this issue by Tolkien (2024: 99–100, 109–11), probably written around 1930 (2024: 85) but only recently published. Tolkien's contention is that older pronunciations will only be preserved as long there is variation in non-poetic speech. This assertion is highly improbable, but this may not have been as readily apparent a century ago, in particular without the benefit of the convenient presentation of the data by Fulk (1992). For example, the *Metres of Boethius*, composed in West Saxon during the Alfredian period shows two non-contracted forms with historical intervocalic **h*, but prose texts from that time and dialect area are ample enough to show that contraction in this context was a done deal (Hogg 2011: 172–5). One could always in principle invoke unwritten colloquial pronunciations as the basis for the poetic forms, but the simpler conclusion is that Tolkien is simply incorrect on this point.

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There is one further possible example from the riddles:

and swiora smæl (73 18a)

This part of *Riddle 73* is, however, badly damaged, so while a meaning 'neck' is likely enough, the lack of context makes interpretation difficult.

Length is also evidenced in early Middle English, in contexts where neither the dialect geography nor the vocalism of the rhyme makes a borrowing of long-vowelled Norse *svíri* likely (Dietz 1970: 19). One instance occurs in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, lines 1125–6:[36]

an mid þīne atelīche s[w]ōre
biwerest manne corn urom dōre
'and with your awful neck you defend people's grain from animals'

Here *s[w]ōre* rhymes with *dōre* 'animals', from Old English *dēore* (with an old etymological long diphthong; cf. Gothic *diuz-*).[37] The same rhyme occurs in an even more telling metrical context in lines 145–6 of the *Moral Ode* (also called the *Poema Morale* and the *Conduct of Life*):[38]

Swīnes brēde is swīðe swēte, swā is of wilde dōre;
al tō dōre hē i[t] abū[ð], þe ȝefð þērfore his swōre.
'Swine's flesh is very sweet, as is (that) of wild game; all too dearly does he purchase it, he who gives for it his neck.'

Here not only does the rhyme point to a long vowel, as also in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, but the metre demands it. In this poem (and in contrast to *Owl*), all lines must end in a heavy syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (Fulk 2002: 344–5). This evidence seems particularly important because the metrical tradition here is a new one, based on a Latinate model. It might be that the examples from the *Metres of Boethius* were metrical archaisms, but this seems highly unlikely to be the case for the *Moral Ode.* This can therefore be taken as good evidence for a real linguistic long vowel in this word, Old English *swēora.*

Speaking for shortness is the spelling *swura* found in late Old English, which shows a change paralleling that of *sweord* > *swurd* (Hogg 2011: 201–2). Since this change is not found with long diphthongs, it provides evidence that the root vowel was, or could be, short in this word. There is thus an internal contradiction in the English evidence which is not easy to resolve.

As far as cognates go, Norse *svíri* (length confirmed both metrically and by the qualitative outcome in later Icelandic) points unambiguously to a uniformly long vowel (Myrvoll 2015). No further Germanic cognates are attested, so the presence of Germanic **h* is insecure, being largely a device to reconcile the different vocalisms of Norse (with a long *í*) and English (where most forms point to a diphthong). Breaking before **rh* is one possibility for explaining this correspondence, but not the only option. Outside Germanic, the putative cognates generally lack any reflex of **ḱ* (> Germanic **h*), excepting only Latin *surculus*, where the velar would seem to be secondary.

[36] Cited from Atkins (1922: 94), except I have added macrons. Note that <u> in *urom* spells [v].

[37] The Cotton manuscript reads *spore*, an error for *swore* (i.e. <spore>), Jesus *sweore*; see Atkins (1922: 95, note).

[38] The quoted text is based on the version in London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 487, which is generally linguistically and textually conservative, though in this instance line 146 requires some minor correction from the other manuscripts. These may all be easily compared in the synoptic edition of Payne (2018: 561–2, cf. 306), whose lineation I follow, and who should be consulted for details. I have added macrons and converted <p> to *w*.

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The question naturally arises of whether a preform like **swirhijan-* is really the only possible way to reconcile the English and Norse forms. Two recent investigators have thought not. Kroonen (2011: 252–4) suggests an ablauting pre-Proto-Germanic **swéirōn*,[39] genitive **swirnós*, yielding Proto-Germanic **swīrō*, **swirraz*,[40] with ensuing levelling and, eventually, a paradigm split with an *a*-stem **swiraz* lying behind Old English *swyr* 'column' and Middle High German *swir* 'mooring mast'. Within the *n*-stem forms, Kroonen adduces Middle High German *swirre*, also 'mooring mast' to support the reconstruction of a form with a geminate, Norse *svíri* and its descendants for the long vowel, and, for the short vowel with a singleton *r* (an analogical combination under Kroonen's analysis), Visperterminen Swiss *šwiro* 'post, stake' as well as the Old English *swĕora*, *swura* 'neck' here under discussion. He does not address the evidence for long *ēo/īo*. The place of Old English *swer* is also unclear: it could perhaps be accounted for through *a*-umlaut, but this change very rarely affects **i* in Old English, the only two reasonably clear examples being *nest* 'nest' and *wer* 'man' (Ringe & Taylor 2014: 34).

Myrvoll (2015: 21) takes a similar approach to Norse *svíri*, deriving the long vowel from older **éi*. Like Kroonen, he considers the Old English reflexes to be short, and suggests that **sweirhan-* > *swīrhan-* underwent pre-cluster shortening in prehistoric Old English,[41] to **swirhan-*, which could then undergo breaking to **swiorhan-*. With loss of **h*, the reflex would still be short: *sweora* (with the merger, found in most dialects, of **io* and **eo*). As for Kroonen, the Middle English evidence for long diphthongs is a difficulty. More than the specific etymology, Myrvoll's key observation is an important one: 'I alle høve er det ikkje naudsynt å rekna med at norr. *svíri* hev fenge den lange vokalen sin ved vederlagslengjing.'[42] His rejection of lengthening before **rh* in North Germanic is persuasive, so some other explanation of length there must be sought.

Neither of these approaches can explain the evidence for long diphthongs in English. An alternative explanation, which can explain the long reflexes but unfortunately not the short ones, might be to assume an **h*, but before rather than after the **r*: **swehr-ijan-*, raising to Proto-Germanic **swihrijan-*. The development in Norse is simple: loss of post-vocalic **h* causes compensatory lengthening, as in *stál* 'steel' < **stahla*^{n}, cf. Old High German *stahel*; *tár* 'tear (of the eyes)' < **tahra*^{n}, cf. Greek *dákru*. This gives *svíri* without complication.

In Old English, **swihrijan-* would give **io* by breaking, but this would be smoothed again to **ĭ* in the Anglian dialects. With loss of coda **h* and lengthening, Northumbrian *suíra*, Old Mercian *swīr-bān* 'neck-bone', West Midlands Early Middle English *swīre*, etc., all come straightforwardly. In dialects without smoothing, the outcome would depend on the details of *i*-umlaut: southeastern *swīora*, *swēora* and West Saxon **swīera*, *swȳra*. The rhymes of *The Owl and the Nightingale* and the *Moral Poem* would reflect southeastern forms, rhyming with the outcome of *dēore/dīore*, which is not surprising for either work (Fulk 2012: 170, 262).

Looking further back, **swehrijan-* would suggest a root **swek-* (or **sweik-*), which may have cognates in Balto-Slavic: Lithuanian *sùkti* 'twist', Old Church Slavonic *sŭkati* 'wind, twine', etc.

[39] I use 'pre-Proto-Germanic' to refer to the period between Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Germanic. I avoid 'pre-Germanic' for this, as this is sometimes used of hypothesized languages from which pre-Proto-Germanic borrowed words.

[40] The change of **-CNV-* > **-C:V-* is Kluge's law, a sound change whose validity Kroonen (2011) is largely dedicated to defending. I find the case compelling (though this need not imply that every proposed etymology and connection that hinges on Kluge's law is correct), and further strongly bolstered by Scheungraber (2014).

[41] Though see Goering (2023: 217–18).

[42] 'In any case, it is not necessary to reckon with Norse *svri* having obtained its long vowel through compensatory lengthening.'

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(Kroonen 2013: 496).[43] The *r would presumably be of adjectival origin: a *swekro- 'turning' (for the type, see Bammesberger 1990: 246–8) being substantivized as a *jan*-stem. The semantic change of 'turner' to 'neck' seems unproblematic.[44] This derivation would suggest that *swer* 'column' and the group of German *Schwirre* are unrelated to the 'neck' words, and should be compared instead to Sanskrit *sváru-*, etc., via **swer-*, with no velar. This has the advantage of getting the *e*-vowel often found for *swer* straightforwardly.

There are two complications that I can see. The less problematic is that no by-forms with geminated **hh* are found for this word, as they are for *tēar* 'tear' and *ēar* 'ear (of grain)'. But then, *h*-forms are also absent in *stȳl* < **stahl-i-*, so this can hardly be regarded as a major problem. The survival of such by-forms would just be a matter of chance. The more problematic is that *swura*, with its apparently short vowel, remains just as obscure under this hypothesis as it does under the traditional derivation from **swerh-ijan-*. Lengthening before loss of coda **h* should be uniform and exceptionless, just as the Sieversian lengthening upon loss of post-consonantal **h* ought to have been. No really obvious mechanism for secondary shortening presents itself.

All in all, the etymology of *sweora* and its many forms in medieval English remains an unsolved problem. Of the four explanations reviewed here, Kroonen's and Myrvoll's can both account for *swura*, but not for the evidence of long forms. On the other hand explanations based either on **swirhijan-* with Sievers' lengthening, or on **swihrijan-*, could account for the lengthened forms, but not the short *swura*.[45] For the present purposes, it is enough to set this word aside as problematic and contradictory in its testimony, and no current explanation seems able to account for the full range of variants actually attested. It cannot be used as evidence to support Sievers' lengthening, since that view of the word's etymology has no greater explanatory power than do any of the other hypotheses.

8. Conclusion

Ever since Sievers (1886), the idea of a sound change **-V̆RhV-* > **-V̄RV-*, with the loss of post-consonantal **h* triggering compensatory lengthening of the preceding short vowel, has featured regularly in historical grammars of Old English. While typologically possible, the linguistic evidence regarding the change is at best very weak, and to some extent speaks against it. Since the beginning, the idea has been tied up very closely with Sievers' analysis of Old English metre, which has always provided the best support for sound change. I have here elaborated on the suggestion by Smith (1956: 243–4) that supposedly lengthened forms were, instead, purely part of the conventions of verse by showing that the distribution of more archaic and more innovative scansions of forms like *feore* parallels the distribution of well-known metrical archaisms. The simplest explanation for the metrical data is that the only elements at work were the traditional memory of scansion with a heavy syllable, based

[43] This root is more often reconstructed, as **sewk-* than **swek-*, on the basis of Slavic evidence such as Czech *soukati*, Russian *sučú* (W. Hock *et al.* 2019, s.v. *sùkti* (*-a, -o/ė*); Rix & Kümmel 2001: 540). If Kroonen (2013: 496) is right to derive English *sway*, Old Frisian *swaaie*, etc., from this root (Proto-Germanic **swanhan-*), it provides evidence for forms with onset **sw-* in Germanic.

[44] Compare, for example, Lithuanian *kãklas* 'neck', from **k^{w}o-k^{w}lh$_1$-os*, to the root **k^{w}elh$_1$-* 'turn' (W. Hock *et al.* 2019, s.v. *kãklas*). Old English *heals* 'neck' and its various Germanic cognates may well be from the same root, **k^{w}ól-s-*, with a similar semantic shift, though this etymology depends on the debated question of whether **k^{w}o-* should delabialize to **ko-* (giving **ha-*) in Germanic; compare in favour Schaffner (2001: 589–90) and Stiles (2017: 895), and against Casaretto (2004: 64) and Kroonen (2013: 205). In any event, the objections to this etymology of *heals* are essentially phonological (and to a lesser extent morphological), and the hypothetical semantic shift seems to be widely accepted as plausible. I would like to thank one of the reviewers for pointing out this parallel.

[45] If this preform is assumed, but Sievers' lengthening is rejected (as I argue it must be), then *swura* becomes explicable, but the Middle English rhyming evidence is left unaccounted for.

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on **feorhǣ* (with historical **h*), and the contemporary, light form *feore* of daily speech. There is no basis for complicating the picture by invoking a supposed lengthened **fēore* in the language as a whole.

With the poetic treatment of words like *feore* explained as metrical archaism rather than evidence of general lengthening, the chief support for Sievers' sound change disappears. There remains only a small body of onomastic evidence from southwest Britain. These forms, discussed in detail by Dietz (1970), do seem to provide evidence of a regionally restricted version of Sievers' change, but there is no reason to generalize this to the majority of varieties of Old English. One might compare the dialectal variability of the similar sound change in Ancient Greek (section 2).

In closing, it may be worth noting that there is something ironic about understanding the heavy scansions of *feore*-type words as metrical archaisms. The identification of such archaisms depends thoroughly on an understanding of the quantitative regulation of Old English verse cogently articulated by Sievers, and the idea of lengthened *fēore*-forms was, by his own testimony, a key moment of insight for him in developing this system. The wider conclusions remain – Sievers' overall descriptive system has been remarkably successful as a framework for understanding and explaining metrical phenomena in Old English, even if various theoretical nuances continue to be debated (see the references in note 1) – but I would reject the idea that helped give rise to it. To my mind, this is really an encouraging state of affairs. Assuming my own argument for these forms as metrical archaisms is correct, then it suggests we can begin with mistaken or imperfect premises, and still arrive at conclusions that are not only sound, but (in Sievers' case) of considerable significance and lasting usefulness.

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Appendix

This appendix lists forms with etymological post-consonantal **h* in the longer Old English poems. Poems are sorted alphabetically within their chronological category. For each poem, lines of ambiguous scansion are listed first (labelled 'Ambiguous'), followed by those scanning according to their younger, post-loss shapes ('New'), followed by those scanning according to their older, pre-loss shapes ('Old'). The *Metrical Psalms* are listed separately, due to their metrical peculiarities; chronologically, they belong with the late group. For further context and discussion, see section 6. Length marks have generally been added, except that the words here under examination have been left unmarked for length one way or the other.

Early Group

Beowulf 933b tō wīdan-feore (Ambiguous)
Beowulf 1843a on swā geongum feore (New)
Beowulf 73b and feorum gumena (New)
Beowulf 1035b eahta mearas (Old)
Beowulf 1152a fēonda feorum (Old)
Beowulf 1293a feore beorgan (Old)
Beowulf 1306a frēonda feorum (Old)
Beowulf 2163b fēower mearas (Old)
Beowulf 2664a swā ðū on geoguð-feore (Old)
Beowulf 3013b sylfes feore (Old)
Beowulf 537a on geogoð-feore (Old)
Beowulf 855b mearum rīdan (Old)
Beowulf 865b fealwe mearas (Old)
Beowulf 917a mearum mǣton (Old)
Christ C 952a fyllað mid feore (Ambiguous)
Christ C 1343a and þæs tō wīdan feore (New)
Christ C 1562b feores unwyrðe (New)
Christ C 1073a feores frætwe (Old)
Christ C 1573b sē-þe nū his feore nyle (Old)
Christ C 1592a fira feorum (Old)

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Daniel 101b be feore dæde (New)
Daniel 225a tō cwale cnihta feorum (Old)
Daniel 559a foldan befolen (Old)
Exodus 548b tō wīdan feore (Ambiguous)
Exodus 171b meara bōgum (Old)
Exodus 384b leofost feora (Old)
Exodus 404a feores frōfre (Old)
Genesis A 43a geondfolen fȳre (New)
Genesis A 1184b on fyore lifde (New)
Genesis A 1330a and feora fæsl (Old)
Genesis A 1342b feora wōcre (Old)
Guthlac A 626b dēaðe bifolene (Ambiguous)
Guthlac A 627b feores orwēnan (New)
Guthlac A 130b monnes feore (Old)
Guthlac A 13a and þǽr ā tō feore (Old)
Guthlac A 286a meara þrēatum (Old)
Guthlac A 291b gif ðū þīnes feore recce (Old)
Guthlac A 548a ealle hȳ þām feore (Old)

Middle Group

Andreas 106a tō wīdan feore (Ambiguous)
Andreas 1452a tō wīdan feore (Ambiguous)
Andreas 1096a on mearum mōdige (New)
Andreas 1107b feores orwēna (New)
Andreas 1130b þe him feores wolde (New)
Andreas 1538b woldon feore beorgan (New)
Andreas 284b þīne feore spilde (New)
Andreas 810a and þæs tō wīdan feore (New)
Christ B 668a bifolen on ferðe (Ambiguous)
Elene 196a befolen in fyrhþe (Ambiguous)
Elene 1288b on wīdan feore (Ambiguous)
Elene 1321b tō wīdan feore (Ambiguous)
Elene 211a tō wīdan feore (Ambiguous)
Elene 134b and feore burgon (New)
Elene 497a befolen fæste (New)
Elene 680b feores ingeþanc (New)
Guthlac B 840a tō wīdan feore (Ambiguous)
Juliana 417a bifolen in foldan (Ambiguous)
Juliana 191b gēn ic feores þē (Old)
Juliana 508b wīdan feore (Old)

Late Group

Brunanburh 72b Wealas ofercōmon (Ambiguous)
Maldon 260b feores hī ne rohton (Ambiguous)
Maldon 194b and hyra feore burgon (New)
Maldon 259b ne for feore murnan (New)
Maldon 239b þā hē on meare rād (Old)

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Metrical Psalms

Psalms 68.10 1a þonne ic mīnum feore (Ambiguous)
Psalms 54.23 3a on middum feore (New)
Psalms 71.17 2a and tō wīdan feore (New)
Psalms 88.26 1a ic him tō wīdan feore (New)
Psalms 88.27 1a ic tō wīdan feore (New)
Psalms 106.8 3b tō feore syþþan (New)
Psalms 51.8 2b āwa to feore (Old)
Psalms 54.22 2b syððan tō feore (Old)
Psalms 60.3 1b āwa tō feore (Old)
Psalms 68.1 2a tō mīnum feore inn (Old)
Paris Psalter 72.14 1b yfel befæle (Old)
Psalms 101.25 3b syððan tō feore (Old)
Psalms 132.4 2b lange tō feore (Old)

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