

## Reviews

**Roberta Frank.** 2022. *The Etiquette of Early Northern Verse*. Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies 2010. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, xxx + 265 pp., \$ 65.00.

Reviewed by **P. S. Langeslag**, University of Göttingen  
E-Mail: planges@uni-goettingen.de

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*The Etiquette of Early Northern Verse* is a dazzling master class in early medieval alliterative style, identifying and showcasing artistic strategies shared by scop and skald. It collects half a century's worth of insights into features that, though not formally required, were appreciated in both Old Norse *dróttkvætt* and Old English verse as expressions of poetic art, notably ornamental alliteration, half-rhyme, and paranomasia; understatement and litotes; and subtle ways of referencing individuals and narratives known to the audience. These insights have been won over the decades by a range of prominent scholars. The work accordingly is relentlessly referenced, a tribute to a generation of bright minds, largely working within the long span of the author's own active career. In fact, since Frank herself has played no small part in the unearthing of poetic conventions here collected, the book may simultaneously be read if not as a *summa francica*, then at least as an essential guide to her legacy. Although the work is based on drafts going back to 2010, its final form incorporates the latest insights and cultural references, and it feels as fresh as anything.

Following an introduction on the slipperiness of style and the rationale for comparing these two corpora, the first chapter sets out, as per its title, the “Rules of the Game” (pp. 1–35). It briefly looks back to the earliest metrical inscriptions, then concisely presents the formal requirements of each of the two headlining traditions in turn. In the process, Frank touches briefly on matters of style so inextricably linked to the alliterative mode that their poetic status is never in question: poetic diction, poetic syntax, and the kenning. A long final section appears to introduce envelope patterns, but soon becomes a showcase for the close reading of passages artfully evoking any kind of circularity, or even just the linear transition from life to death as evoked by seasonal imagery. The longest of these analyses, in turn, expends more words on the meaning of Old English *gebedda* (traditionally ‘bed-fellow’, but often more appropriately ‘consort’) than anything directly connected with the theme of either circularity or transition. In a textbook, this style of organization would draw censure. Since Frank's book is the sublima-

tion in print of a series of lectures, however, what matters here is that valuable insights are passed on in an engaging format. As this chapter represents the opening lecture, it should furthermore set the stage for the remaining instalments. Associative leaps are permissible if these ends are served. As a lecture, then, this first chapter sketches out a landscape, brings out its structural motifs, and fills in the detail on a discretionary selection of features, leaving its audience well informed, well entertained, and ready for more.

The book's central chapter, "Secrets of the Line" (pp. 37–114), is both its longest and its most focused. It comprises two top-level sections, the shorter of which illustrates (extra) half-rhyme with and without alliteration, with and without (pseudo)etymological ties, while its longest section studies supererogatory alliteration. This part of the book in particular is an animated plea for these features to be read as deliberate artistry, frequently wielded with aims beyond mere ornament and emphasis: to highlight real or perceived etymological connections; to forge associative links; to signal narrative structure; to suggest formal register and fill out characters in direct speech; on rare occasion perhaps even to clarify syntax. A worthwhile example of such readings is the suggestion that consecutive alliteration in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* serves to highlight narrative transitions (80–82). A long section on patterns of alliteration and (half-)rhyme surrounding proper names concludes the chapter.

The third and final chapter, "Accentuating the Negative" (pp. 115–162), cites many examples of meiosis and litotes, and documents the apparent rise of the latter in skaldic verse under English influence. It goes on to offer a powerful account of ways of obliquely referencing fateful narratives, and transitions naturally into a section on indirect references to individuals. The book closes with a glorious bibliography.

The volume does not, it should be noted, concern itself with either the teaching or the revision of the received formal requirements of *dróttkvætt* and Old English alliterative verse. These requirements, indeed, are here rattled off in a concise paragraph or two with scant illustration (11–12, 16), and are accordingly best learned from metrical textbooks. Similarly, readers keen on a scrap over the dating of Old English verse had best look elsewhere. The issue is nowhere taken up, and relevant scholarship is not conspicuously shunted for its authors' affiliations with one camp or another. Anyone whose scholarly output centres heavily around dating is not cited much simply because Kaluza's Law is of limited relevance to the subject at hand. The book as a whole is a celebration of poetic style and as such far from polemical in nature, though disagreements are acknowledged where relevant, notably and appropriately where the author draws attention to the fact that the most recent editors of *Klaeber's 'Beowulf'* and *'The Fight at Finns-*

*burg*' attribute the occurrence of crossed, transverse, and enjambment alliteration in *Beowulf* to chance (67; Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008: clxi).

Frank's trademark eloquence is itself as close to verse as academic prose can be, and every bit as associative. Indeed, as the book evolved out of a series of lectures, it has additional aural fireworks not unlike those found in Old English homilies, notably enumerations: of definitions of style (xvi–xvii), of kennings for gold (19), of paranomastic pairs (44), of grammatically derived half-rhymes (48). These work well in spoken settings, but they are hardly less effective on the printed page, where one can mull them over at one's own pace or adduce text editions to consult their wider context. In other places, Frank provides long lists of examples that read as though they were always meant to be consulted in printed form: of half-rhyme (53–58), of crossed alliteration (87–89, 109–110), of litotes in skaldic verse from the time of Danish rule in England (133–141).

Occasionally, Frank takes her search for meaning too far. There is probably no significance to crossed alliteration occurring in the occasional line containing a rare word (86), and not every negated course of action is an instance of litotes. When those fighting to the death at Maldon vow that people will not be able to reproach them for retreating, for instance, there is no need to second-guess their meaning: they are not identifying glory in death as their motivation (120), but rather a fear of living in infamy. Perhaps the most far-fetched reading implied, though not made fully explicit, seeks to explain the tendency of references to byrnies in *Beowulf* to attract multiline clusters of alliteration on *b* and *h*. The supposed design behind this trend remains unclear until the suggestion is subtly raised that this combination of sounds evokes the word *herebyrne* (82–83). Whereas even the simplex term *byrne* is rarely found outside the poetry and accordingly infrequent in the surviving corpus, the statistical case for its associative recall salience is 60 times that of the mildly tautological hapax *herebyrne*. The plausibility of this word having been deliberately hidden in the alliterative structure of the verse may be compared with that of a present-day poet producing a verse sequence alliterating on words like *weapon* and *turret* in hopes that her audience will infer the compound *war-tank*.

Due to the high saturation of poetic illustrations of a narrow range of features, and no doubt owing also to the book's inception as a series of lectures as opposed to a hierarchically organized textbook, the work feels a little enumerative at times, and its section boundaries fluid. Its loose structure is subtly reinforced by the fact that the chapters' unnumbered sections and subsections are barely set off typographically: the latter through title case, while the former are all uppercase but not bolded. This makes it difficult to spot the subsections in particular when browsing. The typography as a whole is markedly minimalist: though lists of verse lines are given, they are not formatted or referenced as tables, and, some-

what remarkably for a book that opens by describing the (admittedly lost) inscribed Gallehus horn and the Rök stone, the book contains no illustrations. Leaving that particular omission aside, the overall effect of these decisions is that the work is best read as a diorama, not as a reference work. This limits its practical applications somewhat, making it less useful as a textbook, though instructors can certainly reorganize its content into teaching notes or draw on its rich bibliography, while either half of the second chapter, or a shorter section from the other chapters, such as that on intertextual references, may usefully be set for reading in a course on poetics. But above all the book wants to be read, cover to cover, author to reader, by anyone interested in early Germanic poetic art. This splendid new work is the most natural sequel to a formal introduction like Jun Terasawa's *Old English Metre*, and I will emphatically recommend that my students and all my colleagues read it as such.

## Works Cited

- Fulk, R. D., Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (eds.). 2008. *Klaeber's 'Beowulf' and 'The Fight at Finnsburg'*. 4th ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Terasawa, Jun. 2011. *Old English Metre: An Introduction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.