

STRUGGLING TO FIND THE POINT: THE SCRATCHED METRICAL POINTING OF *GUTHLAGA* IN THE EXETER BOOK

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IT HAS LONG been recognized that most scribes of Old English were not especially interested in visually encoding the metre of the poetry they have recorded for us. Despite Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe's argument that there was an evolution over time towards a "better" method (read, more like our method) of punctuating poetry, Junius 11's consistent use of metrical pointing is as exceptional as is its use of illustration in presenting Old English verse.¹ So, while it is clear that many scribes were aware of the metrical forms they recorded for us to enjoy (and argue over), it is equally clear—as demonstrated recently by Daniel Donoghue—that such visual encoding was not normal, and that its absence was not seen as a fault.² Scribes of Old English poems were not, of

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1 Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; 2006 paperback reprint), especially 172; 192–93. Some recent discussions of scribal interest in Old English metrical shapes, each with a wide range of references, include Rachel A. Burns, "The Visual Craft of Old English Verse: Mise-en-page in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts" (PhD diss., University College London, 2018); Abdullah Alger, "The Verbal and Visual Rhetoric of Old English Poetry: An Analysis of the Punctuation and Formulaic Patterns in the *Exeter Book* (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501)" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2010); S. C. Thomson, "'Whistle While You Work': Scribal Engagement with Old English Poetic Text," in *Sensory Perception in the Medieval West*, ed. S. C. Thomson and Michael Bintley (Utrecht: Brepols, 2016), 99–122; Daniel Donoghue, "A Point Well Taken: Manuscript Punctuation and Old English Poems," in *Inside Old English: Essays in Honour of Bruce Mitchell*, ed. John Walmsley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 38–58.

2 Daniel Donoghue, *How the Anglo-Saxons Read Their Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

course, stumbling in the darkness, lacking only the enlightenment of the technology of caesura and line breaks. They were using all of the tools and technologies they needed in order to achieve their goals.³

In this chapter, I want to point to how at least one user of one manuscript did not find this sufficient, and sought to visually mark the metrical structures with which this volume is concerned. The fact that this reader felt the need to do so is, I think, interesting in itself: it is evidence of both interest in metre and of finding a scribe's presentation of it insufficient. I have argued elsewhere that it is errors and corrections that help us to understand the conscious thoughts of scribes and readers, and this study is no exception:⁴ particularly interesting here are, I think, the sites at which this reader "struggled to find the point"; places where they sought to comprehend the metre and could not. That our reader was interested in metre and competent at identifying it, and yet struggled in some places, suggests the possibility that some elements of Old English metrical structures were opaque to them, perhaps because the system was in continual flux.⁵ This chapter is, then, a close study of one reader's scratchy interactions with the metre of one manuscript's presentation of one poem: the Exeter Book's *Guthlac A*, with the intention of using it to think about apprehension of metre more broadly.

The marks that interest me here were first discussed by Don McGovern in his appropriately titled "Unnoticed Punctuation in the Exeter Book."⁶ The reason they were unnoticed for so long, and perhaps the reason they are still rarely discussed in studies of the manuscript and its poems, is that they are scratched in dry-point and are remarkably difficult to see. Dry-pointing—simply scratching the surface of a manuscript with any implement and without ink—was very common wherever and whenever manuscripts were made and read. It could have been done with relatively specialized tools, such as the knives universally shown in contemporary images of scribes, or styluses, designed for drafting text on wax tablets, or indeed any solid object at all. Dry-point markings were essential in the course of producing a manuscript: line rulings are the most obvious form, but they can also be seen, as

³ On some gaps between modern and scribal punctuation, see for example, Eric Weiskott, "Making *Beowulf* Scream: Exclamation and the Punctuation of Old English Poetry," *JEGP* 111 (2012): 25–41.

⁴ S. C. Thomson, *Communal Creativity in the Making of the "Beowulf" Manuscript: Towards a History of Reception for the Nowell Codex* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), for example, at 149.

⁵ On the evolution and conservatism of poetic metre, along with chapters in this volume by R. D. Fulk, Mark Atherton, and Megan E. Hartman, see, for example, Eric Weiskott, *English Alliterative Verse: Poetic Tradition and Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ian Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nicolay Yakovlev, "The Development of Alliterative Metre from Old to Middle English" (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2008).

⁶ D. S. McGovern, "Unnoticed Punctuation in the Exeter Book," *MÆ* 52 (1983): 90–99. I am following his findings closely throughout.

in the Exeter Book and the Winchester Bible, assisting in the drafting of some of the more spectacular letterforms and indeed as a draft stage in producing images in the Old English Hexateuch.⁷ The ubiquity of tools for dry-pointing and the frequency of scratched doodles—some more, some less sophisticated—in manuscripts of all sorts suggests that some form of tool was held by anyone who held a manuscript, actively engaged or not with the text itself. These can be very close to the sort of casual graffiti familiar in classrooms and lecture theatres the world over: in their discussion of Lichfield MS 1, Gifford Charles-Edwards and Helen McKee identify up to five hands using dry-point to write about ten names, presumably often the dry-pointers' own.⁸ But they can also be seen productively engaging with the contents of manuscripts. Dieter Studer-Joho's 2017 *Catalogue* builds on earlier work in this regard, and individual studies of manuscripts relatively often throw up such results.⁹ Dry-point glossing may, indeed, have been more common than glossing in ink. But it remains unclear why glosses—texts designed to support comprehension of the main text—were scratched rather than inked in. My personal view, as it almost always is, is that the answer lies in individual circumstances rather than general rules—but we can surely assume that the difficulty in seeing such glosses must have been part of their appeal, whether to preserve the appearance of a manuscript or to conceal the glosses from groups of readers, such as students.

In keeping with this wider picture, dry-point can be seen all over the Exeter Book. There are multiple doodles, from stark triangles in the right-hand margin of folio 59v to heads and figures drawn in the margins of for example folios 78r and 87v. Indeed, almost

⁷ In the Exeter Book, dry-point may underlie a spectacular wynn on fol. 84v; on the other MSS here, see Claire Donovan, *The Winchester Bible* (London: British Library, 1993), for example 27–28; Benjamin C. Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch, Cotton MS Claudius B.IV: The Frontier of Seeing and Reading in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: British Library, 2007), 26–27.

⁸ Gifford Charles-Edwards and Helen McKee, "Lost Voices from Anglo-Saxon Lichfield," *ASE* 37 (2008): 79–89.

⁹ Dieter Studer-Joho, *A Catalogue of Manuscripts Known to Contain Old English Dry-Point Glosses* (Tübingen: Narr Francke, 2017). A large number of other studies discuss some aspects of dry-point glossing; see, for example, Christine Wallis, "Unpublished Dry-Point Annotations in a Manuscript of the Old English 'Bede': Oxford, Corpus Christi College 279B," *MÆ* 85 (2016): 15–32; Scott Gwara, "Further Old English Scratched Glosses and Merographs from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 326 (Aldhelm's *Prosa de Virginitate*)," *ES* 78 (1997): 201–36; Scott Gwara, "Dry-Point Glossing in a Tenth-Century Manuscript of Aldhelm's Prose Treatise on Virginity," *Traditio* 51 (1996): 99–145; Philip G. Rusche, "Dry-Point Glosses to Aldhelm's *De laudibus virginittatis* in Beinecke 301," *ASE* 23 (1994): 195–213; W. Schipper, "Dry-Point Compilation Notes in the Benedictional of St Æthelwold," *British Library Journal* 20 (1994): 17–34; R. I. Page, "New Work on Old English Scratched Glosses," in *Studies in English Language and Early Literature in Honour of Paul Christophersen*, ed. P. M. Tilling (Coleraine: New University of Ulster, 1981), 105–15; Herbert Dean Meritt, *Old English Glosses: A Collection* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1945).

every reader who has worked with the Exeter Book has found more scratches, including drawings (e.g. Bernard Muir's identification on 24v), decorative letters (Patrick Conner on e.g. 80r), and an alphabet (Abdullah Alger on 49v).¹⁰ Alger also notes a range of accent marks scratched above some letters which have not, to my knowledge, been published.¹¹ I think I am the first to note—though I cannot have been the first to see—dry-point lines being used for word separation in *Juliana* at 87b on fol. 67r.7, where the scribe wrote “gifþege-dafen þincem” and vertical lines, also called pipes, have been inserted in dry-point to clarify the distinctions between “gif|þe|ge.” Similarly, on 33v.4–5 the scribe has written line 70a of *Guthlac A* as “wilniað bige-wyrhtum” and a dry-point pipe has been added to separate “bi” and “ge.” There has been some disagreement—most notably between Max Förster and Conner, with some contributions from Muir—as to whether the various doodled images, shapes, and letters were made before or after the writing of the texts;¹² those with which I am concerned today were, like these marks of word separation, certainly all made after the scribe did their work.

The number of students of the Exeter Book who have found different dry-point interactions with the manuscript points us to the same significant challenge noted above: dry-point can be fiendishly difficult to identify. Even when—guided by McGovern's notes—I knew what I was looking for, I have found them much easier to identify on flesh than hair sides, and it took me about an hour to “get my eye in” on the second day with the manuscript before I started to see them again. Capturing them on camera was a process of trial and error with torches, angles, and flash photography; [Figure 1](#) below shows some of the marks that I was able to capture. “Struggling to find the point” is, then, not just a comment on my medieval reader's skills; it is also an acknowledgement that I will have missed many instances, and no doubt misinterpreted a number of those I have seen. Much more needs to be done to understand the use of dry-point in the Exeter Book alone—the mind boggles at the potential vastness of the world of manuscript dry-pointing. Looking at dry-point is also a useful reminder that, for all the wonder of digitization, there is sometimes no substitute for looking at

10 Max Förster's comments are in his “General Description of the Manuscript,” in R. W. Chambers, Max Förster, and Robin Flower, ed., *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry* (London: Humphries, 1933), 55–67 at 60; *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, ed. Bernard Muir (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 15; Patrick W. Conner, “The Structure of the Exeter Book Codex (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS. 3501),” *Scriptorium* 40 (1986): 233–42 at 237, with a useful table of this and other drawings, and discussion; Abdullah Alger, “Two Drypoint Etchings in the *Exeter Book*,” *N&Q* 53 (2006): 153–54 at 153.

11 Alger, “Verbal and Visual Rhetoric,” 58n258.

12 Förster, “General Description,” 60; Patrick W. Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: A Tenth-Century Cultural History* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1993), 123–24; Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 15. It seems fairly clear to me that some were made before and some after.

manuscripts in the flesh.¹³ Some marks, particularly heavy or somehow caught by the light, can be seen on surrogates, but the vast majority cannot. In some places where I could not even see a mark in the flesh, playing with a torch and with moving the book closer to and further away from windows suddenly brought them into focus. As it calls so much more attention to shadows, I think it possible that candlelight or firelight might render them more visible, but this is not an experiment many librarians would be content to permit.¹⁴

Before diving into the detail, it is worth noting that there is no method of which I am aware that can securely date these marks. They show clear understanding of Old English—and of Old English metre—and on those grounds McGovern reasonably suggests that they are most likely to have been made before about 1200. The occasional use of what appears to be lead on, for instance, 35v would date at least some marks to after about 1100. Though it is possible that marks were made at different times, based on the pattern of use within *Guthlac A*, I incline towards placing them together, which would make them a product of a late, perhaps twelfth-century or later reader of Old English.¹⁵ Separately, Scott Gwara has suggested that dry-point glossing may have been a particular feature of Canterbury scriptoria in the later tenth century;¹⁶ if so, this might lead to a suggestion that some at least of the dry-point activity in the Exeter Book may have taken place when and where it was first produced, some time before Leofric donated it to the Exeter community.¹⁷ But these marks are not glosses (at least in the technical sense), and use of dry-point was widespread in space and time: such a suggestion would be very far from secure.

13 See the discussion in Jonathan Wilcox, “The Sensory Cost of Remediation, or, Sniffing in the Gutter of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts,” in *Sensory Perception*, ed. Thomson and Bintley (2016), 27–52; contrast, though, Stewart Brookes’s demonstration that digitized images can help to reveal details, including scratched glosses, invisible to the naked eye, in his online conference paper, “The Book, The Whole Book, and Nothing But the ... Digital Surrogate” as part of *Medium Ævum*’s conference, “Dark Archives 20/20: A Voyage into the Medieval Read and Unread,” September 8–10, 2020, online at www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=nKQebeZ3PeU&feature=emb_logo [accessed September 15, 2020].

14 Wallis notes that UV and daylight lamps made some marks visible to her, “Unpublished Annotations,” 29n5.

15 McGovern suggests three different types of mark in the manuscript as a whole and seems to incline towards several different readers; I am not disagreeing with his findings or suggestion here, but the scratched metrical markings in *Guthlac A* seem to me likely to be the product of a single reader.

16 Gwara, “Further Scratched Glosses,” 202 and 206; Studer-Joho, *Catalogue*, concurs; though Wallis makes the important point that scratches are found where they are looked for (“Unpublished Annotations,” 16); the association with Canterbury may stem purely from Gwara’s interest in Canterbury manuscripts and subsequent shaping of the sub-field of investigation into dry-point marks.

17 The most recent full study of the Exeter Book’s origins and donation, with full references, is in Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 1–3; see also “*John the Baptist’s Prayer*” or “*The Descent into Hell*” from the *Exeter Book: Text, Translation and Critical Study*, ed. Mary R. Rambaran-Olm (Cambridge: Brewer, 2014), 11–27.

Finally, to the meat of the matter—or indeed, to the point: as first noticed and described by McGovern, a number of texts of the Exeter Book have more or less consistent dry-point pointing, which is purely metrical in intent. For the passages in which they occur, they mark (with some exceptions) every poetic half-line, and I have detected no difference between the punctuation of on- and off-verses.¹⁸

As the examples in Figures 1a and 1b, from folios 43v and 44v, show, the marks can be at different angles, vary somewhat in size from about 5mm as on 44v.4 after “bealonip” (marking the end of poetic line 809a) up to about 14mm on 43v.9 following “gemunde” (at the end of 750b). They can be scored in as rough tears, as on 43v.10 after “wundra” (the last word of 752a); be sharp and precise marks as on 39v.17 after “monna” (490a); or more like light indentations, as on 44v.4 after “bealonip” (809a). They also vary in

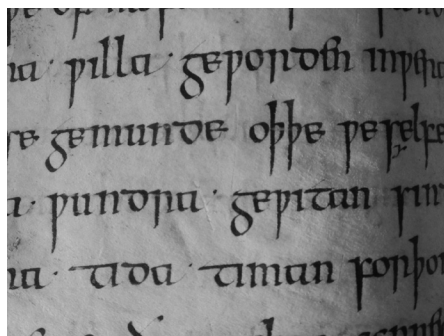


Figure 1a. From folio 43v of the Exeter Book. Photograph author's own; reproduced by kind permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral. Reuse not permitted.

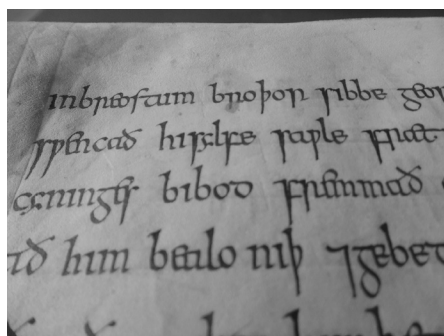


Figure 1b. From folio 44v of the Exeter Book. Photograph author's own; reproduced by kind permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral. Reuse not permitted.

18 For a full index of key technical terms used in this chapter and volume, readers should consult the Glossary of Metrical Terms in the Appendices.

placement: they can be very low, starting more or less from the baseline, as on 44v.2 at the end of “sylfa” (806a); run across a point or part of a letter as on 39v.19 after “dædum” (493a); or be placed up to 5 mm after a letter. As we will see below, they are also occasionally doubled, as on 39v.20 after “sippon” (494a), sometimes even crossing one another. As far as I can tell, there is no clustering of these variant forms. Most marks are, however, about 10 mm long and are placed in the middle of a space, 2–3 mm from the letters on either side. Most are reverse *solidi*, like backslashes, though the angle is never especially consistent.

It is worth noting that the manuscript’s sectional breaks for *Guthlac A*—which Roberts numbers as fitt divisions—may mark shifts in the manner of dry-pointing activity, with, for instance, generally lower and smaller marks in Roberts’s fitt 9, poetic lines 722–818. Perhaps the dry-pointer worked in bursts of activity, marking sections up day by day or week by week. However, precisely what was being looked for, still more what was being done with marked-up text (beyond an interest in their metre implying an interest in performing the lines) is impossible to know without more data.

Whatever our dry-pointer was doing with these metrically punctuated fitts, there is a quite different pattern of activity in several other texts of the manuscript, including all three *Christ* poems, *Juliana*, and *The Phoenix*. In texts other than *Guthlac A*, as far as I could tell—and bearing in mind how difficult I found it to see the marks—dry-pointing is never consistent across more than a side, and is usually more closely focused than that.¹⁹ On folio 56v, containing 39–73a (“halge”) of *The Phoenix*, for instance, lines 61b–65a are marked up:²⁰

ne þær wæter fealleþ,
lyfte gebysgad, | ac þær lagustreamas, |
wundrum wrætlice, \ wyllan onspringað \
fægum flodwylmum. \ Foldan leccaþ \
wæter wynsumu

[nor does water fall there, | disturbed by wind, | but there streams of water | wonderfully worked, \ spring out from wells \ in lovely flood-surges. \ The ground is moistened \ by delightful water]

The mark over the final *s* of “lagustreamas” is, incidentally, deep in the gutter, suggesting that it was made when the book was disbound, or at least bound rather more loosely than it is now. There are (as far as I can tell) no other dry-point markings on this side, so why mark up these lines? They contain beautiful poetry—but then, so does much of *The*

¹⁹ This is broadly in line with McGovern’s findings; he suggests that there may have been specific interest in the theme of ascension, “Unnoticed Punctuation,” 94–95, and discusses the pattern of activity outside *Guthlac A* in more detail than I do here, 90–93.

²⁰ Unless otherwise noted, I quote normalized Old English text from the relevant modern edition, including punctuation, but insert pipes and solidi (| \ /) to make some indication of the form of scratched mark. Translations from Old English are my own and usually attempt to follow verse-by-verse phrasing for ease of comparison between versions. Quotation from *The Phoenix* is from *The Phoenix*, ed. N. Blake (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1964; 1990 rev. ed.).

Phoenix—and this isn't even a sentence. Maybe the marker was looking for a quotation about water—linked to a baptism?—or maybe they just liked this sequence.

The marking up of the opening to *Juliana* suggests similarly intermittent interest, starting after line 5b and marking the end of each b-verse down to line 13, nipping back in to mark the ends of lines 18–25 and returning intermittently thereafter: a mistaken mark in 28b (of which more below); one at the end of line 45; another mistaken mark in 59b; at the end of line 61; and then marking the ends of 64a, 64b, and 65a. This pattern—if it can be seen as such—continues for the rest of *Juliana*, with marks always used to indicate metrical boundaries, but never consistently for more than a few verses. As far as I can tell, the dry-pointer does not exclusively focus on the ends of b-verses outside of *Juliana*'s opening lines, and their interest does not seem to be sustained for more than five poetic lines.

Taken together, the dry-point evidence from *The Phoenix* and *Juliana* suggests an extract-based approach to reading poetry: the identification of a few lines which were, for reasons now irrecoverable, of particular interest, perhaps for a moment or perhaps for some wider purpose. Such an interest in very small sections of poems could in turn be connected with what is apparently a slightly garbled single-line quotation of *Beowulf* 869 written into the lower margin of a collection of Alcuin's letters, probably in York.²¹ It could even be associated with the evidence of borrowing and allusion across a wide range of Old English poems, as is currently being investigated by the CLASP project. Indeed, it is of a piece with the culture of extracting, splicing, and slyly referring to texts evident in the composite *Genesis* of Junius 11; in the relationship between *Daniel* and *The Song of the Three Youths*; in the interdependence of *Andreas* and *Beowulf*, and indeed of *Guthlac A* and *Andreas*; and in the apparently widespread use of moments from *The Dream of the Rood* which Jane Roberts discusses in this volume. Early medieval poetic culture looks increasingly fluid and interactive.²²

However, as noted above, the dry-pointing in *Guthlac A* is much more regular: nearly comprehensive. On folio 41r, for example, which contains text from the middle of poetic line 567a to the middle of poetic line 603a, there are 72 verse boundaries. Of these, fifteen (that is, 20 percent) are not marked by a scratch. This is broadly in keeping with the proportion throughout the second half of the poem, with, by my counts, 584 of 736 verse boundaries marked, meaning a rate of 79 percent. I have chosen 41r as the example here because almost all of the omissions can be explained—some more certainly than

²¹ The manuscript is now London, British Library, Harley MS 208, with the note on fol. 88r. For a recent reading, with references and discussion of earlier interpretations, see Thomson, *Communal Creativity*, 256–59.

²² Rachel A. Burns discusses a different kind of physical mark—the inter-word space—as a site of scribal interactivity in her essay of this volume.

others—by the scribe's own processes of encoding.²³ That is, where there is no dry-point mark, there appears to be some form of scribal indication of a verse boundary.

First, and most frequently, if there is a scribal point, whether or not it is followed by a small capital, then our dry-pointer does not usually make a mark. This explains eight of the omissions on 41r: those at the ends of poetic lines 573b, 580b, 589b, 586b, 589b, 591b, 595b, and 598b. Second, if a verse end coincides with the end of a manuscript line, there is usually no mark. This is the case for only one verse ending on 41r, that of 573b, but it is almost always the case that the dry-pointer does not mark verses that coincide with manuscript line endings. And it follows that if these two incidences co-occur, there is no mark, as at the ends of 568b and 576b.

Two more unmarked metrical breaks, those following 575a and 600a, can be explained more speculatively. Both 575b and 600b start with an enlarged lower-case *l*, which are preceded by a slightly enlarged space. The first of these is not usually read as a sentence break by modern editors; the second is.²⁴ It is plausible, then, that these relatively slight scribal indications of a break of some kind were enough to satisfy the dry-pointer. On the other hand, it is worth noting that shortly after poetic line 600, a large space is left between 602a and 602b, which nonetheless receives a dry-point stroke; in line with O'Brien O'Keeffe's findings, it seems likely that it is the combination of space or point with small capital, rather than any of these occurring on their own, that could be read as punctuation of a break.²⁵

This leaves three unmarked verse boundaries on this side that I do not read as marked as such by the scribe: those after 577a, 591a, and 602b. That is, there are just 3 out of 72 verse boundaries (4 percent of the total on this side) that are (as far as I have been able to identify) not made legible by the combination of scribe and dry-pointer. These explanations for unmarked verse breaks, and the rough proportion of unmarked verse breaks that are not indicated in some other way by scribal activity, broadly hold true across the portion of the poem that I have examined. That is, with a few exceptions, what the dry-pointer produced, working highly sympathetically with possible scribal indications of metrical breaks, is a fully metrically legible text of *Guthlac A*.

The degree of variation (explicable and inexplicable omissions) in a passage—on a side—of otherwise flawlessly accurate, absolutely consistent marking of metrical boundaries is interesting. It implies that some of the suggestions that have been made for scribal indications of metrical boundaries were at the very least seen as such by one reader armed with a stylus.²⁶ It also implies a fairly high degree of consciousness in the

²³ It is also possible to see the majority of the marks on this side on Muir's digital image, in *The Exeter DVD: The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, ed. Bernard Muir, with Nick Kennedy, programming (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006).

²⁴ On the interest and challenge of small capitals, especially *l*, see O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song*, 156–57n5; cf. Thomson, *Communal Creativity*, 180–181.

²⁵ O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song*, for example, 162.

²⁶ See especially Burns, "Visual Craft" throughout; Thomson, *Communal Creativity*, 201–7.

The caesura no longer coincides with the sentence break and there is no possible alliteration (unless perhaps “gæste” could be read as *ġæste*; compare lines 316 and 531 where Iuliana alliterates with *ġ*), with no gain aside from relegating *hio* to a subordinate position.

Line 59 also has its challenges: the conventional reading scans 59a as Type E with resolution and 59b Type B with a long initial dip:

S(x) s x S x x x x x S x S
firen-dædum fah, gehyrde þære fæmnan word

Neither verse is straightforward, and the dry-pointer seems to have sacrificed the caesura in order to read 59a as Type A and 59b as a more conventional Type B:

S x x x S x x x x x S x S
firen-dædum fah, gehyrde þære fæmnan word

This gives us a reader who, while perfectly capable, struggles with (mildly) unusual patterns.

Given the regularity with which most of it is marked up, there are two relatively lengthy passages of *Guthlac A* which have very light dry-point punctuation: lines 376–79 on 38r have three marks; 465–69 on 39r–39v have just two. This must be because of the challenges in the metre here, because both are usually read as hypermetric sections:

næfre ge mec of þissum | wordum / onwendað þendan mec min gewit gelæsteð.
beah þe ge hine sarum forsæcen: ne motan ge mine sawle gretan,
ac ge on betran gebringað. Forðan ic gebidan wille \
þæs þe me min dryhten demeð: nis me þæs deapes sorg.²⁸ (lines 376–79)

[you will never turn me aside from these | words, / while my intellect serves me. Even if you attack it so painfully, you will not be permitted to harm my soul, but instead you will make it better. Therefore I will await \ whatever my Lord determines for me. I have no anxiety about death.]

(... Fela ge fore monnum miþað þæs þe ge in mode / gehycgað,
ne beoð eowre dæda dyrne, beah þe ge hy in dygle gefremme.)
“We þec in lyft gelæddun, oftugon þe londes wynna,
woldun þu þe sylfa gesawe þæt we þec soð onstældun;
ealles þu þæs wite awunne forþon þu hit onwendan ne meahtes.” \ (lines 465–69)

[([... You conceal from people much of what you in your hearts / are thinking; your deeds are not hidden, even if you do them in secret.) “We brought you up into the air, deprived you of the pleasures of the land, wanted you to see for yourself that what we accuse you of is true. You have endured torment for all this, because you were not able to change it.” \]

²⁸ Quotations from *Guthlac A* are from *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*, ed. Jane Roberts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). Quotations above (p. 194) are from the MS, using Roberts’ line numbers.

As is evident, of the five marks used in a possible eighteen positions, three do not accord with our scansion of the lines. It seems probable that the dry-pointer recognized the difficulties that they had run into at line 376: “næfre ge mec of þissum” looks like a possible on-verse, but that does not work if the off-verse begins “wordum.” So the on-verse must end with the noun and begin “onwendað.” But, reading on, it immediately becomes evident that this doesn’t work either. Deciding not to puzzle it out, the dry-pointer read on until it made sense again, triumphantly marking at the end of 379 and then resuming as before. Perhaps mindful of this headache, they were wary by line 465, leaving the whole section virtually untouched before again recording the end of the nightmare and resuming normal business.²⁹ That single erroneous mark in 465 is puzzling. The scribe points after “gehycgāð” and uses a minor capital for “ne,” so the end of the poetic line is quite clearly indicated; marking a metrical break after “mode” seems almost wilfully perverse and, if nothing else, demonstrates the dry-pointer’s total bafflement. It also suggests that the dry-pointer was willing to ignore the rule of the non-alliterating final position when necessary, with “mode” here made to fill the final two positions of the long line despite alliterating with the on-verse stresses.

The same approach can be seen on folio 40r, where the single hypermetric line 510 has an erroneous mark in the b-verse:

Oft ge in gestalum stondað; / þæs cymeð steor / of heofonum (line 510)

[You keep on making accusations; punishment will come from heaven for them.]

There is, of course, nothing wrong with “þæs cymeð steor” as a verse in its own right, but in classical metre it cannot follow “Oft ge in gestalum stondað.” As Mark Atherton demonstrates in this volume, late Old English metre did accept alliteration on the final lift. But such difficulties occur again and again with hypermetric lines, usually apparently based on not reading far enough ahead and simply marking a metrical break after a possible on-verse. In lines 636, fols. 41v–42r, and 701, fol. 42v, for instance, valid on-verses (“wop to widan”; “ac ge hine gesundne”) are produced at the cost of separating caesura from syntactical break:

636: wop to widan / ealdre—næfre ge þæs wyrpe gebidað—\

701: ac ge hine gesundne \ asettaþ \ þær ge hine sylfne genoman: \

The correct site is marked in 701, presumably as a correction, but not in 636. Perhaps the turn of the manuscript page after “ealdre” allowed the dry-pointer to ignore the excessively long b-verse thereby created, or perhaps the long line was just too much. Indeed, as edited

²⁹ It is possible that the apparent decision not to scan some hypermetric sections was motivated by reading them as closer to prose.

by Jane Roberts, there are ten hypermetric lines in the second half of *Guthlac A* (465–69; 510; 636; 701–2; 741). Of these, only two (702 and 741) are correctly marked up (that is, marked up in accordance with our current understanding of hypermetric verses).³⁰ This seems to contradict McGovern's suggestion that the general focus of the scratches on hypermetric sections was intended to support less confident readers:³¹ it seems more likely that the hand making the marks is itself uncertain about scansion.

The impression given in these sections is, then, that the dry-pointer worked word-by-word and verse-by-verse, without reading ahead, and was somewhat uninterested in puzzling out difficulties.³² Hardly an ideal student. It is worth noting, though, that some identifiable errors are followed by double lines. At line 571 on fol. 41r, for instance, the dry-pointer mistakenly marked too early in the a-verse, and then set two lines after the correct boundary:

571: þæt he in þone grimman \ gryre |\ gongan sceolde,

This is readily explicable: "þæt he in þone grimman" is a valid on-verse, which could have been followed by an off-verse starting with "gryre"; indeed, "gryre gongan sceolde" is just about a plausible verse, though an unusual one, with either double alliteration in the b-verse (but we have seen that the dry-pointer is less concerned about final-lift alliteration than are most of our poets), or an unstressed infinitive followed by an inflected verb carrying a lift. We cannot know whether it was these metrical considerations, or the syntactical structure, or a combination of factors, that convinced our reader to change the reading, but they do seem to have done so. Most likely, we see them here, as with line 376, reading only a word or so at a time and marking the metre in along the way, and then swiftly realizing and seeking to correct the error. This is an easier mistake to correct than the hypermetric stretches, so the correction is effected with a double stroke, and then the reader moves on. Similar uses of a double line in the correct position when a mistake has been made can be seen at 515, 647, and 649. This does not, it should be noted, explain anything like all of the double lines: I see nineteen instances in the second half of *Guthlac A* which cannot be explained in this way, one of which—at line 500, fol. 40r—is itself a mistake.

In the second half of *Guthlac A*, from line 450 onwards, I see uncorrected errors being made in sixteen verses, with clusters of two mistakes in lines 500–501, 645–46

³⁰ On some of the complexities of reading hypermetric verses, see, for example, Roberts's discussion in this volume.

³¹ McGovern, "Unnoticed Punctuation," 92.

³² It is worth comparing Leonard Neidorf's very similar reading of scribal errors in the copying of *Beowulf*, "Scribal Errors of Proper Names in the *Beowulf* Manuscript," *ASE* 42 (2013): 249–69.

and 689–99a. As only 2.2 percent of the 736 verses of these lines, this degree of error is probably enough to pass peer review; it is, I think, important to note that the dry-pointer was not remotely incompetent. As far as I could tell—and I have been conservative in these counts—152 verses are not marked at all; of the 584 marked, the proportion of errors is still only 2.7 percent.

Aside from the hypermetrical lines, is there any way of explaining the errors made here? I have to admit that I am not sure; it is not always clear precisely what the error was. But here are some guesses.

Poetic lines 645–46 seem to have presented a particular challenge:

Forðon ic getrywe \ in þone \ torhtestan \
 þrynesse \ þrym se geþeahtingum \

[Therefore I trust \ in that \ most radiant \ glory \ of the Trinity, which by its counsels \]

Perhaps this came about because of the light on-verse, which can be legitimately read instead as “Forðon ic getrywe in þone,” necessitating an off-verse of “torhtestan þrynesse”. This, too, scans, so the dry-pointer’s scansion only falls apart with the *646b it produces: “þrym, se geþeahtingum.” As with lines 571 and 701, the dry-pointer seems at this point to have gone back and worked out that the correct breaks came after “getrywe” and “torhtestan,” though it should be noted that my hypothetical double mark of correction is not used, resulting in a sequence of marks that would be confusing to anyone not familiar with the process gone through. This does not account for the lack of a new mark after *þrym*, but as it is at the end of a manuscript line, the dry-pointer probably reckoned it to be unnecessary.

Line-initial dips—which Roberts observes occur more frequently and at greater length in *Guthlac A* than in *B*—may, then (as here and, above, in 571), have provided a challenge.³³ But there is an interesting contrast with hypermetric verse: while the dry-pointer did not expect them, they were able in both sites to go back and correct readings. Lengthy line-initial dips, then, were challenging but comprehensible to our reader.

Not including hypermetric lines, there are two sites where the b-verse is artificially shortened by the dry-pointer, who misses out the final non-alliterating lift on a monosyllable:

684: duguð ond drohtað.” Ða cwom dryhtnes \ ar, \

792: rodera rice, \ | þa þe ræfnað \ her \

These examples once again give the impression that the dry-pointer was ready to accept alliteration on the final lift: it is plausible that, as with the artificially shortened on-verses discussed above, “Ða cwom dryhtnes” was read as a Type C and “þa þe ræfnað” as

³³ *Guthlac Poems*, 61–62; for a fuller study of the poem’s metre, see Jane Roberts, “A Metrical Examination of the Poems *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B*,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 71 (1971): 91–137.

Type A. In both instances, after reading one short word, the error was recognized and corrected.

The largest single group of errors are, in fact, mis-readings of the b-verse, perhaps functioning in this same way, where the on-verse is scanned first and independently, with whatever words come next being forced into a shape that could form an off-verse. The first of these is, though, not explained by this hypothesis. Line 499b acquires an additional word, becoming “þæt se gæst lufað onsyn” (presumably to be read as Type B). Two intersecting lines are marked after “onsyn” and one after “lufað,” indicating that the dry-pointer recognized and corrected the error. While 499 is metrically uncomplicated (and the dry-pointer’s *499b difficult to scan), it is perhaps plausible that the dry-pointer was confused by syntax, with the object of the soul’s love starting a new line. This construction (line-final finite verb with object in the succeeding on-verse) does, though, occur in the preceding 496b–97a, which is marked at the foot of 39v with no apparent difficulties. Perhaps the scribe’s enlarged spaces either side of “onsyn” caused confusion.

Line 547b is also expanded by a single word to become “þegnas grimme ealle.” This is an interesting error because it may mark an awareness of rhyme: “þrea wæron þearle: þegnas grimme ealle” is a pleasing phrase and makes sense, having “ealle” inflect “þegnas” rather than “hy,” and resulting in an acceptable line *548, though one requiring stress on a pronoun: “hy þam feore fyl gehehton.” This may be why it has not been corrected; I would tentatively suggest this as not an error at all, but an alternative (possibly even preferable?) reading.

Line 648b also acquires a word, becoming “næfre motan torn.” A mark is correctly inserted after “motan,” but this time the double line comes at the caesura of 649 rather than correcting the mistake. So the lines (as edited by Roberts but as pointed by our reader) are:

þæt ge mec mid niþum \ næfre motan \
torn\mode teon | \ in tintergu

Lines *648b–*649a use alliterating chiasmus (m ... n | n ... m); we will see below an instance in 501 of possible concern around this sort of decoration. It again produces a pleasing pattern: “motan torn | mode teon.” And both “næfre motan torn” and “mode teon” are plausible verses. The different scansion, then, is comprehensible. But it results in an incomprehensible idea: *torn-mode* must be a compound here, otherwise *mode* is left floating on its own. It could perhaps be read as syntactically parallel to “mec”: “that you, grievous, will not be able to drag me, [my] mind, with evil acts into torments”; or to “niþum”: “that you, grievous, will not be able to drag me with evil acts, pride, into torments.” But neither is satisfactory, and the other markings suggest that the dry-pointer, having read the first word of the *649 they had created, recognized the issue. Confusingly, here the double mark appears to indicate a site of correct pointing, rather than to indicate an error.

The 689b produced by the dry-pointer is also in some ways preferable to the poet's. Again, a single word is added, producing "þæt se leofesta gæst." The scansion requires superlative and noun to be separated: "þæt se leofesta | gæst gegearwad in Godes wære | on gefean ferde" (689b–691a: "that the most beloved | spirit, prepared, into God's keeping, | into bliss, could travel"). There is no corrective mark, and the end of 690b is correctly marked; the problematic *690 ("gegearwad in | Godes wære") thereby produced is not noted; perhaps *690a was read as Type A3 and *690b as A (x S x x | S x S x). The following sentence sees a similar choice of syntactical clarity over metrical regularity. The poet's "ða wearð feonda þreat | acol for ðam egšan" (Then was the band of fiends | terrified by that fear, 691b–692) receives instead a metrical break after "acol," with "for ðam egšan" standing alone. This, too, is uncorrected, and would again have to be read as A3, although we have seen above that light verses were often problematic for our reader. Most likely, as is clear with hypermetrical verses, the dry-pointer was not overly concerned with sites where the metre could not be readily comprehended and simply focused on producing verses that worked syntactically and metrically rather than seeking to solve all of the metrical challenges of the text.

Finally, 707b also gains a word, becoming "fore eowere mengu." This is entirely comprehensible: "fore eowere," with alliteration on the vowel, is not easy to scan, and it is another grammatical phrase disrupted by a metrical break. Double alliteration on *m* in 708 must have made the scansion quite clear, and marks are correctly made but with no double mark.

This leaves three errors where I struggle to see precisely what went wrong. A mark in the middle of 501b "mid | dangeard" I find inexplicable. Is it possible that the alliterating syllable is being highlighted? This is an elegant long line, playing with *g*- and *m*-: "ðe gemete monige geond middangeard." The mark dividing "mid/dan" could perhaps ensure that it is read with stress on *m*- rather than being deceived by the prevalence of initial *g*-. Or it could be syllabic separation, but I have not identified any other instances of this phenomenon.

Likewise, I do not clearly understand what the errors were, or indeed the challenges, in 515–16 or in 657–58, where the marks are:

synnum asundrad; sceolde he \ sares þa gen \
 dæl adreoga ðeah þe dryhten his \
 fæger ond gefealic \ in fæder | wuldre,
 ðær eow næfre fore nergende \
 \

Possibly the dry-pointer read 515a as ending after "he"—which would be unusual but not unmetrical, but makes little sense given the apparent sensitivity to syntax in other lines. And what could be the motivation for marking after "fæder"? In both instances, there is no mark after the subsequent a-verse. This may suggest confusion, as where hypermetrical lines are simply not marked until they start to make sense again, but I think more likely—especially at 657, where the end of the b-verse is not correctly marked—the dry-pointer thought there was a pattern. I, though, cannot see how to scan what has been produced here.

What have we learned from this dive into some scratches in the Exeter Book? As ever, when working closely with medieval manuscripts, we have found much that we cannot explain. But I think we have also seen with some certainty that an early medieval informed and interested reader of *Guthlac A* found its metrical breaks important, and, despite being able to recognize them as such, mostly found the scribal indications of metrical breaks insufficient. We have seen focused engagement with poetry as poetry by a probably quite late reader of Old English, with clear knowledge of metrical rules, an interest in engaging with them, and sensitivity to the aesthetics of the poetry, but with some specific areas of ignorance and a propensity to pass on by when a particular passage became too challenging to scan. We have also seen that the reader seems likely to have been making marks for themselves alone, as—quite apart from the difficulty of seeing scratches in the first place—the pattern of marks to indicate corrections is simply too inconsistent to support an uninitiated reader's use of them. Some aspects of the pattern of marking and sites of confusion seem to support propositions made elsewhere, including in this volume, for the changes in poetic metre and for scribal indications of metrical patterns. Finally, as this volume as a whole demonstrates so clearly, we have seen that the often-divided worlds of manuscript, literary, and linguistic study of Old English poetry are intertwined and interdependent.

