Varieties of Repetition in Old English Poetry. Especially in The Wanderer and The Seafarer

Repetition is a device as vital to Anglo-Saxon poetry as rhythm and meter. It emphasizes important themes, reinforces the rhythm peculiar to the poetry, clarifies its oral-formulaic origins, enriches its traditional diction, and enhances its periphrastic quality. The poet had a stock of words, formulas, and metrical combinations on hand but he also knew a number of methods of using, repeating, balancing and varying them. This paper is an attempt to show some of the ways repetition was used in Old English poetry by examining how these devices were used in two poems, “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer.” Since the poems have traditionally been considered to be alike in theme, imagery and structure, one would assume that they are similar in their poetic usages but, as I will show, this is not true. Their differences reveal that each poet had access to a wide variety of ways of using a restricted number of devices. The poems differ not only in theme and imagery but in the formal poetic usages of their respective poets. Thus repetition reflects the stylistic preferences of each poet and the effects that these preferences have on each poet.

One type of repetition that was a basic convention in Anglo-Saxon poetry was alliteration. Usually the poetic line was made up of two half-lines, two stresses to each half. The first three stressed elements alliterated; probably the alliteration was determined by the third stressed element. There was, of course, some variation – some lines had two, three, five or even six stresses and sometimes only two words alliterated – one in each half-line. All vowels could alliterate with each other and sc, sp, and st could alliterate only with themselves. Generally, these were the rules that determined alliteration for all poets.

What is interesting though, is not the convention of alliteration but the variety of uses to which it was put – the frequency of occurrence of alliterative sounds, how it emphasized certain themes, how it contributed to rhythmic regularity, and how it united certain lines.

The chart on p. 293 shows the alliterative choices in “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer.”

Several features are worth consideration here. Neither poet uses (p), (r), (sc), or (sp) as alliterating phonemes at all. This seems to be characteristic of these poems only since an investigation of other poetry shows that (r) alliterates in “Christ,” “The Phoenix,” “Juliana,” and Beowulf; (sc) alliterates in “The Whale,” “Widsith,” “The Kentish Psalm” and “The Dream of the Rood” and (sp) alliterates in “The Battle of Maldon,” “Juliana” and “Riddle D.” (p) very rarely alliterates anyway since there are comparatively few native words in Old English that begin
with it. The choice and frequency then of alliterating phonemes are stylistic. Besides omitting (p), (r), (sc), “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer” poets use (n), (st), (t) and (δ) very little or not at all, some of which are used quite often in other poems.

The lack of frequency of /p/, /r/, /sp/, /n/, and /st/ is not very surprising since even a superficial examination of the entries in Bosworth and Toller’s *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, shows that words beginning with these sounds are proportionately low in number. However, /t/ and /δ/ occur quite often in Old English as initial sounds in both prose and poetry and the fact that they are used only once each in “The Wanderer” for alliteration and not at all in “The Seafarer” reinforces the idea that the choice of phonemes in alliterating position is stylistically important.

A glance at the following chart which lists the alliterating phonemes that occur most frequently in each poem as well as a list of the Old English phonemes in order of their frequency as initial sounds is revealing. Only the six most frequent sounds in each poem and in Old English as a whole are listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English:</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>w</th>
<th>g</th>
<th>s</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>h</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wanderer:</td>
<td>V(12%)</td>
<td>h(12%)</td>
<td>V(12%)</td>
<td>h(12%)</td>
<td>m(9%)</td>
<td>s(7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seafarer:</td>
<td>V(18%)</td>
<td>h(16%)</td>
<td>m(10%)</td>
<td>s(9%)</td>
<td>w(9%)</td>
<td>f(8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most noticeable feature here is the unusually high percentage in “The Wanderer” of (w) as an alliterating phoneme over all the others—almost twice as many lines have it as the next most frequent one, (h). In “The Seafarer” (h) is the consonant sound used most often, almost as often as the vowels. So “The Wanderer” poet prefers (w) far more than the next three phonemes, (h), (V), (f), which are used in about the same propor-