Enhancements and Embellishments: Poetic Compounds in the Old English *Whale*

Tenaya Fottrell
Smith College '25

As a major feature of Old English linguistic and literary convention, poetic compounds play a significant role in the Old English *Physiologus*. The vernacular text is derived from the Latin *Physiologus B* as the next in a long chain of historic translation and transformations to the work's catalogue of animals, their behaviors, and their allegorical significance. With its linguistic roots in Greek, likely in the city of Alexandria in the third or fourth century, the *Physiologus* is a text that very much embodies its multicultural past, bringing Indian, Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman legends of the natural world into the early Christian world. Somewhere between the fourth and sixth centuries, the Greek exemplar was adapted into Latin among other languages, and in this form entered into Europe where its allegories and fantastic descriptions made it a popular candidate for educational and homiletic contexts.[1] With the widespread popularity of the Latin *Physiologus*, translation projects began adapting the text into vernaculars, including Old English, in the late tenth century. These translations not only transposed the *Physiologus* into further languages but also adapted them to popular exegetical frameworks to allow for as many layers of meaning and interpretation as possible. As the earliest of these European vernacular re-renderings, the Old English *Physiologus* "both expands and contracts its source" in order to make use of native diction and thus further assert its message. [2] One of the areas in which this expansion is most obvious and effective is the *Whale*, in which the anonymous Old English poet draws out his allegorical description significantly to present an evocative image of the deceitful

[1] Michael J. Curley, *Physiologus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xxviii.

[2] Megan Cavell, *The Medieval Bestiary in English: Texts and Translations of the Old and Middle English Physiologus* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2022), 36.

nature both of the animal and of Satan. The use of poetic compounds throughout the *Whale* serves to embellish the *Physiologus* poem and strengthen the piece's connection to the Old English vernacular literary tradition and its own allegorical message.

The precise definition of the term *kenning* in reference to Old English poetics has long been the subject of scholarly debate, with claims of overapplication and overly-exacting criteria both flying about academic circles since the earliest days of the study of skaldic literature and its influences.[3] The term itself is Old Norse, expressed via example only in the prose *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, and while the poet offers many paradigms in his native tongue, these prove of little use in expanding the classification to encompass Old English poetic compounds of the same form and function given the lack of an explicit definition. Despite oppositional interpretations, major scholars from Rudolf Meissner to Andreas Heusler agree that the *kenning* is in essence "a two-part figure consisting in a metaphorical base and an associative determinant," in the words of Thomas Gardner.[4] Ultimately, however, I find that the constraints set on any one definition of *kenning* create too narrow a field of compounds of interest for examination, as inevitably cleaving to those terms which specifically possess genitive modifiers or headwords with no synecdochic connection to their referents, a restriction that would preclude the study of many terms which merit investigation. I here use the term "poetic compound" to refer to those Old English words composed of two parts with specific qualifiers individually and as a unit and frame their referents in periphrastic terms. The primary component of such a word is its head, a term which may stand on its own as a simplex and is not identical to the referent of the compound, although the two may share some qualities. The head of a poetic compound generally takes second position in the complete term and determines the lexical category of the new compound and thus its inflectional pattern. The secondary component of a poetic compound is the modifier, which usually precedes the head and can also function as a separate word in simplex form. The modifier provides an associative or contextualizing link between the headword and the compound's referent. For example, a poetic compound with the sun as its referent might be the word *heofoncandel* [heaven-candle] where *candel* [candle] acts as the head—the sun is not literally a candle but shares some of its illuminating—and *heofon* [heaven] is its modifier; the sun may be understood as the candle of heaven, shining brightly and on a grand scale from its place in the sky. It is important to note that this paper does not discuss every poetic compound word present in the Old English *Whale*, but rather that every poetic compound discussed meets the qualifications I have laid out, albeit some more distinctly than others.

[3] Thomas Gardner, "The Application of the Term 'Kenning,'" *Neophilologus* 56, no. 4 (October 1, 1972): 464–68.

[4] Thomas Gardner, "The Old English Kenning: A Characteristic Feature of Germanic Poetical Diction?" *Modern Philology* 67, no. 2 (1969): 109–17, https://doi.org/10.1086/390147.

The compounds *sæmeara* [sea-horse][5] and *yðmeara* [wave-horse] serve as prime examples of effective translatorial application of poetic compounds, gesturing towards the broader literary and linguistic tradition from which they descend while also underscoring the poem's seafaring focus by drawing attention to the vehicle through which humans interact with the whale itself. Both of these compounds refer to the unfortunate ships which encounter the whale as it pretends to be an island, with the former appearing line 15 as the speaker describes the way in which the sailors "setlaþ sæmearas sundes æt ende" [settle the sea-steeds at the edge of the water].[6] This line is not a direct translation of any portion of the original Latin text. Not only is the term "sea-steeds" a poetic elaboration upon the previously-stated referent-base "scipu" but also the entire phrase within which it sits is an expansion upon the very concise "applicant nauem suam iuxta eam," one of four poetic restatements of what occupies just two phrases of the Latin *Physiologus*.[7] Later in the poem, *yðmeara* appears in a similarly expanded context: where the original bears only the phrase "et nauem secum trahit in profundum maris,"[8] the Old English lists "se þe bisenceð sæliþende / eorlas ond yðmearas" in lines 48–49a,[9] positioned at the end of a 20-line exegesis of the figure of the whale as the devil. The substitution of the novel "wave-steeds" for the repeated use of *navis, navis* [ship] perfectly demonstrates the function of the poetic compound as a device inheriting the *kenning* tradition—it serves to "vary the more ordinary designation of the referent" as well as to offer a riddle-like periphrasis that opens the door for the more extended chains of metaphor pivotal to the skaldic poetic tradition.[10]

Not only do the compounds *sæmeara* and *yðmeara* exemplify the literary function of their compound class, but together they provide key linguistic information about the landscape of nautical Old English literature. Separated from one another by several distinct synonyms for the word "ship," it is significant that both employ the headword *mearh* [horse] in their construction. *Mearh* and other synonyms for "steed" are quite commonly used in poetic compounds for boats throughout the Old English corpus,[11] easily marked even by modern readers. The double instance of *mearh*-based compounds in the Old English *Whale* mirrors a case study from Britt Mize on *kennings* for hail sharing the form "*q*-est of grains." Mize concludes that, for such direct mimesis to occur across texts, there must be a socially-understood phraseological formula at its core.[12] While, as with Mize's hail

[5] All translations of individual compounds are original, based on the work of Andy Orchard and the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary. Translations of longer passages of Old English and Latin drawn from and credited to Megan Cavell and Michael Curley respectively.

[6] Cavell, *The Medieval Bestiary in English*, 62.

[7] Francis J. Carmody, *Physiologus latinus: éditions préliminaires versio B* (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1939), 41.

[8] Carmody, *Physiologus latinus*, 42.

[9] Cavell, *Medieval Bestiary in English*, 63.

[10] Bright, *Bright's Old English Grammar & Reader*, 269.

[11] Gardner, "Old English Kenning," 113.

[12] Britt Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities: The Old English Poetics of Mentality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 87.

compounds, *sæmeara* and *yðmeara* have several featural differences, the words' shared headword means that they "share a number of properties which in aggregate make them immediately recognizable as actualizations of a single underlying formal template,"[13] thus linking *The Whale* to an established cultural lexicon and thereby highlighting the importance of ships. In these instances, the poetic compounds highlight the way in which ships facilitate sea travel and thus encounters with the whale itself. Furthermore, using *mearh* as the base of the compounds implies that the boats are alive and can thus die, for the compounds appear at pivotal moments in both the literal and allegorical narratives: the landing of the ships—giving in to the temptation to let one's guard down—and their sinking—death and subsequent descent into hell.

In a similar way, the poetic compounds *wæterþisa* [water-rusher] and *mereweard* [ocean-guardian] both describe the whale, co-opting base words with decidedly non-evil connotations in compound contexts; *þisa* [rusher] is generally associated with ships and *weard* [guardian] with God.[14] These deceptive compounds reflect the deceitful nature of their referent, bolstering the negative associations with the whale and locating it firmly within the poem's allegory as the central devil figure. The first of these poetic compounds serves as an elaboration upon the original Latin text, just as the kennings for ships do. Lines 49b–50 of the Old English—"He hafað oþre gecynd, / wæterþisa wlonc, wrætlicran gien,"[15] [It has another trait, the proud water-traveller, more wondrous still]— take the place of the simpler "Secunda eius beluae natura haec est" [The second nature of the monster is this] from the older Latin *Physiologus*.[16] Here, *wæterþisa* acts as the first metrical foot of the first half-line, thus establishing the alliterative pattern for the rest of the line and calling attention to itself in doing so. The compound also affords far greater poeticism and even specificity than does "eius beluae" while avoiding a direct restatement, conveying more characteristic information through the figure "water-rusher" than a plain synonym. The same pattern of elaboration in direct translation is visible to an even greater degree with *mereweard*, for the whale is nothing more than an implied subject in the Latin "mergit se in aquam" [it plunges itself in the water], not specifically named anywhere in the sentence.[17] In contrast to this, the Old English poet includes several pieces of figurative language as functional glosses to the phrase "ðonne se mereweard muð ontyneð" [then the ocean-guardian opens its mouth] in line 53,[18] directing attention to the insidious "ocean-guardian" as the focal point for the

[13] Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, 92.

[14] Notably, there are no attested uses of the word *þis/þys* in a simplex form, but it is unlikely that its appearance in the Old English *Whale* is mere scribal error, as it is prominent in descriptions of boats, to which the speaker compares the whale. See Ann Squires, ed., *The Old English Physiologus*, Durham Medieval Texts 5 (New Elvet, United Kingdom: Durham Medieval Texts, 1988), 83.

[15] Cavell, *Medieval Bestiary in English*, 64.

[16] Carmody, *Physiologus latinus*, 44.

[17] Carmody, *Physiologus latinus*, 44.

[18] Cavell, *Medieval Bestiary in English*, 65.

second part of the allegory where previously emphasis had been upon the sailor-victims. Where traditional Latin diction embraces ellipsis to maintain a concise sentence structure, Old English aesthetics prize layers of "complex verbal designs" in large part because the use of poetic synonyms acts as one standard by which it is possible to judge the skill of a singer or speaker working ex tempore.[19] Thus, the addition of poetic compounds to a more substantive-sparse Latin text acts as a means of asserting one's artistic skill, hence the prominence of terms like *wæterþisa* and *mereweard*.

When looking more closely at this pair of compounds, however, it is once again the headwords rather than the characterizing modifiers that are of primary literary interest. Throughout the Old English corpus, the word *þisa* as a noun appears almost exclusively in compounds related to ships in the forms *brimþisa* and *wæterþisa*—its instance in line 50 of *The Whale* being one of just two total exceptions to this rule and also being atypical in that it contains a reference to the ocean but does not refer to a boat.[20] This unexpected referent aligns perfectly with the primary theme of the first section of the poem's allegory, centering deception both in the form of the word and its function within the text. Just as the sailors are doomed because they believe the whale to be an island, so too might a reader at first be confused because *wæterþisa* seems as if it ought to refer to a ship when taken out of context, but does not in one of only two total recorded uses, leading to significant ambiguity within even its most authoritative definitions.[21] The headword of *mereweard*, *weard* [guardian] is far more common in Old English, but this does not lead to greater clarity as, in the majority of its instances in all of vernacular literature, it either is associated with positive figures or refers directly to God.[22] Once again, the disparity between base connotation and referent is especially stark in light of the allegory at play in the poem, where the eponymous whale stands as an obvious Satan figure, leading unsuspecting souls to hell with false promises. This misleading through a potential conflation of God with the devil directly maps onto typical Old English portrayals of Satan, for "unclassifiability points to the danger [Satan] poses in a culture and poetics so concerned with order" as Cavell notes.[23] In this way, the fact that the poetic compounds *wæterþisa* and *mereweard* do not immediately register as referring to the evil whale when viewed in isolation—or even within limited context—serves as a prime example of the way in which the compounds serve to advance the poem's allegorical message through the most basic level of their construction.

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[19] John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 76, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/oa_monograph/book/84689.

[20] Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, and Antonette diPaolo Healey, eds, "Brimþisa," in *Dictionary of Old English: A to Le* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Dictionary of Old English Project, 2024).

[21] Joseph Bosworth, "Wæter-Þísa," in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014). https://bosworthtoller.com/34544.

[22] Joseph Bosworth, "Weard." in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014). https://bosworthtoller.com/34829.

[23] Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 140.

Between ship- and whale-referent terms, Old English poetic compounds serve a variety of functions within *The Whale*. These four words, *sæmearh*, *yðmearh*, *wæterþisa*, and *mereweard*, act as significant expansions upon the *Physiologus*' Latin text, both forming integral parts of added flourishes not found in the original and acting as noteworthy embellishments in areas of more direct phrase-for-phrase translation. While all four compound modifiers fit into the same category of synonyms for water, the shifts or lack thereof in headwords actively further the two components of the Old English *Whale*'s allegory by highlighting the role of human complicity in sin and the deceitful nature of the devil. These four words make up a fraction of the Old English *Whale* and an even smaller portion of the *Physiologus* text as a whole, but it is clear that the work's poetic compounds truly enhance as well as embellish the piece both through and because of their connection to Old English linguistic traditions writ large.

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