OLD ENGLISH *HREOL* 'REEL': WELSH *RHEOL* 'RULE'

HREOL 'reel' is attested in late Old English as a gloss on alihruz 'reel' (from XIX. xxix of St Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies)* It also figures in *Gerefa,* a text on estate management attributed in its final form to Archbishop Wulfstan, and linked with the Church's lands in Worcestershire, which covered over half the county.[1] *Gerefa* lists the word amongst necessities for making cloth: linen flax, spindle, *reol,* yarn-winder, and so on.[2]

Old English provides the forms hreol (in the supplement to Ælfric's *Glossary), reol,* and *riul.* Middle English contains few instances of *reel* used in its literal sense, though *OED* quotes late examples from the Laud *Troy Book* and *Promptorium Parvulorum.* Yet the verb *reel* is fairly common. Langland uses it at C.IX.81 in describing poor widows who card wool, wash and patch clothes, scrape flax, *rele* (wind yarn on a reel), and peel rushes to make lights.[3] The verb *reel* is also used figuratively in Barbour's *Bruce,* the alliterative *Morte Arthure,* and the work of the *Gawain*-poet with the various meanings 'roll; turn suddenly; sway in combat; wheel about; stagger; prance wildly, run riot'. Typical is an *OED* citation from Barbour, on a battle-line wavering, becoming unsteady, and giving way: 'The king … saw thame reland to and fra'. Association of *reel* in these senses with Old English *hreol,* proposed cautiously by *OED* and Gollancz, is accepted without query by Norman

[1] Dorothy Bethurum, Episcopal Magnificence in the Eleventh Century, in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur,* ed. S. B. Greenfield (Eugene, Oregon, 1963), 162-170, at 168; Janet Bately, The Nature of Old English Prose, in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature,* ed. M. R. Godden & Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), 71-87, at 73.

[2] H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1962), 113.

[3] *Piers Plowman,* ed. D. A. Pearsall (London, 1978), 164.

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Davis.[1] As we discuss the translation 'roll' below, it is worth noting exactly how the *Gawain*-poet employs this verb.

He uses it six times. At *Sir Gawain* 229 the Green Knight 'reled hym vp and doun'; at 304 'runischly his rede y¥en he reled aboute'; at 1728 a hunted fox swerves, 'ofte reled in a¥ayn, so Reniarde watz wyle'; at 2246 the Green Knight tells Gawain they can sway in combat as they wish, 'Here are no renkes vs to rydde, rele as vus likez'. At *Patience* 147 Jonah's ship slews round in a hurricane, 'hit reled on roun vpon pe ro¥e ypes'; at 270 Jonah rushes down the whale's throat:

> He glydes in by pe giles pur¥ glaymande glette,
> Relande in by a rop, a rode pat hym po¥t.
> Ay hele ouer hed hourlande aboute,
> Til he blunt in a blok as brod as a halle.[2]

At 229 Tolkien and Gordon, after Napier, refer *nym* to eyes, translating 'rolled them up and down', and 'rolled' at 304 also. But the first is challenged by Andrew and Waldron, who prefer the interpretation 'swaggered' of earlier editors.[3]

OED declines to give an etymology for *hreol* describing it as without cognate in other Germanic languages, sense and form being against a connection with Old Norse *hræll* 'weaver's beam'. This caution is not shared by Continental scholars, who derive *hræll* from Germanic **hranhila-, hreol* from **hrehula-,* both related to Old English *hrægl,* Old High German *hregil* 'gewand', Greek *kerkis* 'spitzes gerät zum festschlagen des gewebes', Lithuanian *krekls* 'hemd', and even Russian *kresat* 'mit dem Feuerstahl Feuer schlagen', Ukrainian *kresnuty* 'Feuer schlagen', and Sanskrit *kresati* 'Feuer schlagen'.[4]

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1 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. Israel Gollancz, EETS os 210 (London, 1940), 169; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. J. R. R. Tolkien & E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1967) 207.

2 *Patience,* ed. J. J. Anderson (Manchester, 1969), 40.

3 *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript,* ed. M. R. Andrew & R. A Waldron (London, 1978), 216.

4 Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern, 1948-59), 618-619; Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch,* 2nd edn (Leiden, 1962), 263.

But it seems *OED's* scepticism is well-founded, and that Old English *hreol* 'reel' is actually to be derived from Welsh *rheol* 'rule'. The etymology of *rheol* was established long ago as being via *reol* <*ryol* <*rywol* <*rwyol* from Latin *regula* (with long *e),* which also gives Cornish *rowl,* Breton reol, and Old Irish *riagol*.[1] Support for the Welsh etymology is given by the forms *ryol,* in a life of St Beuno and translations of Geoffrey of Monmouth of the thirteenth century, and *rywoli* and *rwyoli,* in poems by Llywarch ap Llywelyn (fl. 1173-1220), the 'poet of the pigs'.[2] *Rhywolus* 'orderly' still features in the work of Dafydd ap Gwilym (fl. 1330-60).[3] *Rheol* normally means a religious rule, as in the Welsh *exemplum* (containing a Middle English snatch) of the wolf who tried a monastic vocation, but could not stop thinking of lambs and rams.[4] Yet a vital clue for our purposes occurs in a translation made c. 1300 of *Promptuarium Bibliae* by Peter of Poitiers (d. 1205), where the *regula aurea* of Joshua 7: 21 appears as *ryol eur.*[5] The Authorized Version here reads 'wedge [literally 'tongue'] of gold'; modern Bibles read 'bar' or 'ingot'; but in Classical Latin *regula* means 'rule, bar, staff, lath, stick', and this is how it is understood in Welsh.

The development of Modern English *reel* <Old English *hreol* <Old Welsh **reol* <Latin regula 'stick' becomes clear once we understand that early reels actually were sticks. Reels rotating on an axle reached England only about 1300. This is made clear by the histories of technology, which prove the stick-reel was known in early times. Schliemann found an 11-inch stickreel at Troy, with a great quantity of carbonized woollen yarn still wound on it lengthways; similar reels have been found in the prehistoric lake-villages of Switzerland; and the stick-reel is used even now in many countries. A devel-

1 Ifor Williams, Nodiadau Iethyddol, *Y Beirniad* vi (1917-8), 273-6; Henry Lewis *Yr Elfen Ladin yn yr Iaith Gymraeg,* (Caerdydd, 1943), 7; K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 331; *Brut y Brenhinedd,* ed. B. F. Roberts (Dublin, 1971), 51; J. Vendryes. *Lexique etymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettres R* S (Paris, 1974), R26.

2 *The Life of St David and Other Tracts,* ed. John Morris-Jones (Oxford, 1912), 26; Henry Lewis & Holger Pedersen, *A Concise Comparative Celtic Grammar* (Göttingen, 1937), 62; *Brut Dingestow,* ed. Henry Lewis (Caerdydd, 1942), 320.

3 *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym,* ed. Thomas Parry (Caerdydd, 1952), 491.

4 *Chwedlau Odo,* ed. Ifor Williams, 2nd edn (Caerdydd, 1957), 5, and cf. Bella Millett, 'The Origins of *Ancrene Wisse', Medium Ævum,* lxii (1992), 206-28, at 226.

5 *Y Bibyl Ynghymraec,* ed. Thomas Jones (Caerdydd, 1940), 19.

opment of it, the cross-reel with two bars criss-cross, one usable as a handle, is shown on a Hallstatt urn from Sopron in northwest Hungary; but the turning reel reached Europe only in the late twelfth century, arriving together with the spinning wheel. Both came from Indla. Early evidence for the spinning wheel in Europe comes from Parls, where it was used from about 1268, and from Speyer in the Upper Rhineland, in a trade statute of 1298. An English spinning wheel is represented in the Luttrell Psalter of c. 1338. As for the turning reel, a caricature of c. 1310 from the Ypres 'Book of Trades' shows a monkey winding a hank of thread onto one.[1] Since the turning reel does not predate the spinning wheel, the Old English hreol must have been a stick-reel. Hence its name can be derived from Velsh *rheol* 'stick, rule', enabling us to identify *reel* as another previously unrecognized Celtic loanword in English.

Is this argument agreeing with the chronology of Welsh and English changes in sound? Jackson, citing *æt Hroden* (the river Roden, Shropshire) from a charter of 975, and *Hris* for 'Rhys' in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 1052, felt that Welsh unvoiced *r* (for which the grapheme *rh* is a sixteenthcentury invention) did not effectively exist before the tenth century, since it is not shown in English spelling before then. The variants spellings *rheol, reol, riul* in late Old English sources accord with this interpretation, Anglo-Saxons at that date perceiving Welsh unvoiced L only intermittently. As for the development *wy> yw> y>e,* Jackson felt the evolution of ei from Welsh long *e* was not finished until the later seventh century.[2] Because time would be needed for the various stages from Old Welsh **ruiol* to *rheol,* Old English *hreol, riul* from Welsh *rheol, ryol* is likely to be a late borrowing, perhaps of the tenth century. Since *hreol* occurs in *Gerefa*, a West Midland text, and possibly reflects the influence of Welsh spinning girls (Riddle 12 in the *Exeter Book* being evidence for Welsh slavewomen in Anglo-Saxon England), it can be related to *cader* 'cradle' and *baban* 'baby' in the AB dialect as a domestic word taken by English from the language of Welsh servants (probably women).[3]

[1] F. J. Mone, Zunftordnungen einzelner Handwerker, *Zeitschrift für Geschichte des Oberrheins*, xv (1863), 281, cited in R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* (Leiden, 1955-72), iv. 158, 168-70; *A History of Technology,* ed. C. J. Singer *et al.* (Oxford, 1954-8), ii. 208.

[2] Jackson, 330-5, 477, 479-80.

[3] E. J. Dobson, *The Origins of 'Ancrene Wisse'* (Oxford, 1976), 115.

Such an origin influences interpretation of the Middle English verb *reel.* Because the stick-reel was twitched or jerked from side to side as yarn was wound on it, the original figurative sense of *reel* must have been 'waver, swerve, twist round'. A sense 'roll' could not develop until the turning reel was known. This strengthens a case for translating 'swagger' at *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 229, while at 304 the sense may be that the eyes of the Green Knight darted about, rather than 'rolled'. Yet a reading of *Patience* 270 shows the poet knew the later sense 'turn, rotate'. Jonah, washed into the whale's mouth, tumbles head over heels down its gullet, with lines 270-1 describing the same action, as *Ay* 'always' proves. The passage reveals the *Gawain*-poet's gift for visualizing movement or action, as with the raising of the axe at 421-6 of *Sir Gawain,* or the lady's entering the bedroom at 1182-1203.[1] Since *relande* at *Patience* 270 certainly means 'rolling', the turning reel must have reached the Cheshire Staffordshire area by the poet's time, bringing the extended sense 'roll, rotate' to the verb *reel.* So line 270 of *Patience* must, somewhat unexpectedly, reflect the arrival in the Rorth-West Midlands of medieval new technology and its associated textiles manufacturing revolution.

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[1] Marie Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: a Stylistic and Metrical Study* (New Haven, 1962), 120-9; A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain Poet* (Cambridge, 1970), 91-2, 231; Andrew & Waldron, 37; P. A. M. Clemoes, Action in *Beowulf* and Our Perception of It, in *Old English Poetry: Essays in style,* ed. D. G. Calder (Berkeley, 1979), 147-68, at 147-8.