RICHARD DANCE
The Trouble with Vikings: ‘Difficult’ Old Norse Borrowings in Middle English

An ICOME conference in Norway is the ideal opportunity to reflect on the considerable role played by the early Scandinavian languages in the development of English. Tracing this Old Norse influence has, of course, long fascinated scholars, and there has been much interesting recent work both on the linguistic evidence for it and on the contexts and nature of the contacts in Viking Age England which brought it about. Nevertheless, there remains a surprising amount still to do to identify and understand lexical borrowings from Old Norse in the surviving records of medieval English. This task can be a very challenging one, not least etymologically: given the genetic proximity of the languages in contact, and the patchiness of our knowledge of the vocabularies of both the source and target languages prior to and during the crucial period, it can be unusually difficult to establish which late Old and Middle English words really do show some input from Old Norse. (See, amongst many others, Townend 2002, Dance 2003 and 2011, Pons-Sanz 2013 and 2015, Durkin 2014: 190–219.) Things are especially tricky when it comes to the rich and diverse vocabulary of Middle English texts composed in the North, North Midlands and East of England, particularly the self-consciously showy and frequently obscure word-hoard of alliterative verse. Great literary monuments like the poems of the Gawain manuscript, The Wars of Alexander and the alliterative Morte Arthure contain hundreds of words whose forms, meanings or usage have been explained as showing Old Norse input by one or more commentators (in a plethora of editions, books, articles, dissertations and historical dictionaries) since the mid-nineteenth century. But the vocabulary of these texts has not been treated together from this perspective in a full, etymologically analytical study since Björkman’s panoramic survey of the Scandinavian loans in Middle English (1900–1902).

This paper draws on my ongoing work on the vocabulary of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (see Dance 2013), and introduces the larger ‘Gersum Project’ which has developed from it. Gersum is a collaborative project underway in Cambridge and Cardiff, funded for three years by the U.K.’s Arts and Humanities Research Council, in which Sara Pons-Sanz, Brittany Schorn and I (with the support of HRI Digital in Sheffield) are investigating all the words which could be derived from Old Norse in a range of late Middle English alliterative poems. In this paper, I shall present some of the fruits of this work so far, focusing on instances where the evidence for Scandinavian input is especially troublesome and, therefore, especially interesting. There are dozens of items in our texts whose etymology is essentially ‘obscure’, but where Old Norse derivation or influence is one amongst several more or less convincing attempts at an explanation, including the likes of balz, enker-, draeled, flosche, gjlpynng, gryndel, loupie, slokes, snitered, sprit, taysed, traunt and wyles. By examining a selection of these colourful and remarkable words — some of them well-known cruces in the etymological literature, some barely discussed at all — I shall explore in what ways these supposed relics of Viking activity prove to be so ‘difficult’, considering some of the things this tells us not only about the linguistic evidence itself, but also about the ways scholars have treated it. These words will help illustrate a few of the diverse and fascinating problems which beset linguists, editors and literary critics trying to interpret their material in the engagingly messy contexts of English language history — which can include (often at one and the same time) having to reconstruct forms much earlier in the history of Germanic, trying to
work out what the words in our Old and Middle English and Old Norse sources actually mean, and wrestling with possible input from the other languages of medieval Britain.

References


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The Gersum Project: <http://www.gersum.org>