

CHAPTER SIX

Verb History

Unlike the early English noun, which poses formal problems relatively unfamiliar to the student of Modern English, the early English verb may be studied in a generally familiar context, that of "regular" and "irregular," or "weak" and "strong." Every modern schoolboy knows that the overwhelming majority of Modern English verbs develop their tense patterns through the addition of *-ed* to the unchanged stem, and that a few verbs (heavy duty performers, for the most part) show tense changes through a change in the verb stem itself: *ride, rode, ridden*. What the schoolboy probably does not know is that this twofold patterning of modern verbs has its roots in the Germanic background of English, and that Old English, as a Germanic dialect, manifests

precisely these same conditions, altered in proportion perhaps but essentially like.

It should be noted at the outset that each verb pattern has three convenient and related defining terms. *Regular* verbs are so called because they make up something over 99 percent of the total Modern English verb-stock. They are called *weak* rather fancifully, because they indicate tense change externally, lacking, one might speculate, the intestinal fortitude to change internally. (The verb-stem in *walk*, *walked*, *walked*, after all, does not act; it is acted upon from without.) The third defining term for this class of verbs, *suffix*, refers to the dental *-ed* (regularly pronounced *t*), which is the standard addition to the verb-stem. The *irregular* verbs (irregular because there are only about one hundred and sixty such verbs among the thousands in Modern English) are *strong* because they change internally, without outside help. They are also called *ablaut* verbs in recognition of their Germanic nature (the Germanic term means vowel-gradation or the change in the radical vowel in a series of related root syllables). The vowel gradation in *ride*, *rode*, *ridden* is an I/o/i ablaut, or internal sound change.

I

Perhaps it is well to begin with the strong verbs. About half of the total number of 330 in Old English survive today. Some of the original stock crossed over to the weak group (*burn*—originally *byrnan*, *barn*, *burnon*, *burnen*—and *help*—originally *helpan*, *healp*, *hulpon*, *holpen*—are examples) and others have disappeared from English (*snīpan*, to cut, and *niman*, to take, survive in modern German cognates, *schneiden* and *nehmen*). In one important aspect, the Old

English strong verbs differ from their modern descendants: where there are regularly three "principal parts" (infinitive, past, past participle) to a Modern English verb (strong or weak), there are four to the earlier verb. Thus, *ride*, *rode*, *ridden* would be *rīdan*, *rād*, *ridon*, *riden* in Old English. *Rād* and *ridon* are the past tense¹ roots for singular and plural. We should note here the essential and regular features of the principal parts of the Old English verb. The *-an* attached to the stem *rīd-* is the indication of the infinitive (cp. German *-en*, or Latin *-āre*, *-ēre*, *-ere*, *-īre*), and it applies to strong or weak verbs. The *-on* inflection is the regular sign of the past-plural condition for strong and weak verbs. The *-en* inflection defines the strong past-participial form.

A conjugation of *rīdan* will further clarify verb structure, as to tense (present and past),² number (singular and plural), and person (first, second, and third):

PRESENT INDICATIVE

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First Person	ic rīde	wē rīdaþ
Second Person	þū rīd(e)st	gē rīdaþ
Third Person	hē, hēo, hit rīd(e)þ	hie rīdaþ

PAST INDICATIVE

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First Person	ic rād	wē ridon
Second Person	þū ride	gē ridon
Third Person	hē rād	hie ridon

¹ *Preterit* is a common alternate term for the past tense concept, especially for Germanic grammar.

² Old English lacks distinctive future-tense forms; the present forms may be interpreted as future in appropriate contexts.

PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First Person	ic ride	wē rīden
Second Person	þū ride	gē rīden
Third Person	hē ride	hīe rīden

PAST SUBJUNCTIVE

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First Person	ic ride	wē rīden
Second Person	þū ride	gē rīden
Third Person	hē ride	hīe rīden

PRESENT PARTICIPLE

rīdend

PAST PARTICIPLE

rīden

The present indicative inflections survive past Middle English into early Modern English, e.g., *ridest*, *rideth*, though *rideth* loses something of its original plural emphasis. The past indicative shows the second person singular sharing the stem of the past plural forms; the first and third person singular stem, however, is ultimately to survive as the single stem for all past tense forms, singular and plural. The subjunctive forms, it will be noted, are relatively simpler than the indicatives, with *-e* and *-en* serving as the inflections for both tenses: an interesting anticipation of the Modern English subjunctive, which in theory is fairly complicated but formally much less so. The original present participial form of the verb, with its *-end* inflection, is alien to our sense of the form. We derive our *-ing* from the early Germanic *-ung*, a substantive inflectional concept that survives in *Achtung* (Action), *Hoffnung* (Hope).

Rīdan is only one of a series of related strong verbs in Old English. It is regularly described as a Class I strong verb: all verbs in this group share the *ī/ā/i* ablaut row.³ Other examples are as follows:

	<i>Past Singular</i>	<i>Past Plural</i>	<i>Past Participle</i>
<i>Infinitive</i>			
rīsan (rise)	ras	rison	rīsen
drīfan (drive)	drāf	drifon	drīfen
bīdan (bide)	bād	bidon	bīden
glīdan (glide)	glād	glidon	glīden

There are six other groupings of Old English strong verbs, which may be summarized as follows:

Class II verbs share an ablaut row of *ēo/ēa/u/o*.⁴

bēodan (bid)	bēad	budon	boden
clēofan (cleave)	clēaf	clufon	clofen
smēocan (smoke)	smēac	smucon	smocen
rēocan (reck)	rēac	rucon	rocen

Verbs in Class III are grouped according to the consonant structure of the stem. Regularly, Class III verbs share a nasal or a liquid plus a second (non-nasal, non-liquid) consonant in the stem.⁵

³ Except for certain "contract" forms (e.g., *þēon*, prosper), where one must assume the earlier presence of the vowel row.

⁴ Here, too, certain forms (e.g., *flēon*, flee) represent a contraction of an earlier form.

⁵ Here, the vowel row may differ, depending on whether the first consonant is liquid or nasal.

Infinitive	Past	Past	Past
	Singular	Plural	Participle
bindan (bind)	band	bundon	bunden
helpan (help)	healp	hulpon	holpen
weorpan (throw)	wearp	wurpon	worpen
weorpan (become)	wearþ	wurdon	worden
gylpan (boast)	gealp	gulpon	golpen

Class IV and Class V verbs generally resemble those of Class III in that the consonant structure of the stem determines the grouping. Class IV types show a single stem-consonant, either a nasal or a liquid:

cuman (come)	cōm	cōmon	cumen
niman (take)	nōm	nōmon	numen
beran (bear)	bær	bæron	boren

Verbs in Class V also show a single stem-consonant other than a nasal or liquid:

metan (measure)	mæt	māton	meten
tredan (tread)	træd	trædon	treden
sprecan (speak)	spræc	spræcon	sprecen
gifan (give)	geaf	geāfon	gifen

Class VI verbs are classified by the ablaut row *a/ō/ō/a*:⁶

faran (journey)	fōr	fōron	faren
slean (strike)	slōg	slōgon	slagen ⁷
wadan (go)	wōd	wōdon	waden

⁶ Only the verbs of Classes VI and VII disclose an identical stem-vowel for their preterit singular and plural forms.

⁷ The preterit and past-participial forms here suggest that *slay* and *slug* are ancient relatives.

Class VII verbs show no simple or evident rationale for classification, but rather an original similarity in the common Germanic preterit forms. This condition is called reduplication because the initial stem consonant is repeated medially, as in *heht*, an early preterit of *hātan* (call) and *reord*, a preterit of *rādan* (advise). (The second *h* in *heht* discloses this condition.) But the standard Old English forms have contracted and the reduplication is only evident in the lengthened stem vowel.

hātan (call)	hēt	hēton	haten
lātan (let)	lēt	lēton	lāten
bēatan (beat)	bēot	bēoton	bēaten

At this point it is relevant to emphasize once more the commonality of the Germanic language group through the obvious cognate relationships among the strong verbs. The following chart for the first six classes of strong verbs in Old English, Gothic, and Old Norse will testify to this point:

OLD ENGLISH, GOTHIC, AND OLD NORSE STRONG VERBS

Class

I	OE	bīdan (bide)	bād	bidon	biden
	G	beidan	baip	bidun	bidans
	ON	bīþa	beip	biþu	beþinn
II	OE	bēodan (bid)	bēad	budon	boden
	G	biudan	baup	budun	budans
	ON	bjōþa	baup	buþu	boþinn

OLD ENGLISH, GOTHIC, AND OLD NORSE STRONG VERBS

Class

III	OE	bindan (bind)	band	bundon	bunden
	G	bindan	band	bundun	bundans
	ON	binda	batt	bundu	bundinn
	OE	helpan (help)	healp	hulpon	holpen
	G	hilpan	halp	hulpun	hulpans
	ON	helpa	halp	hulpu	holpinn
IV	OE	beran (bear)	bær	bæron	boren
	G	bairan	bar	bērun	baurans
	ON	bera	bar	bāru	borinn
V	OE	metan (measure)	mæt	mæton	meten
	G	mitan	mat	mētun	mitans
	ON	meta	māt	mātu	metinn
VI	OE	faran (travel)	fōr	fōron	faren
	G	faran	fōr	fōrun	forans
	ON	fara	fōr	foru	farinn

II

The Old English weak verbs, though far more numerous, are much easier to classify. Essentially there are two closely related types, differing only in the vowel of the suffix. The Class I weak verbs may be illustrated in the principal parts of *fremman* (do, perform): *fremman*, *fremede*, *gefremed*. It will be noted here that the infinitive inflection is the simple *-an*, and the inflections for the preterit and past participle the dental *-ed* (e). Class II weak verbs resemble Class I, except that the vowel in the infinitive inflection is a diphthong and the vowel of the past tense forms is *o* rather than

e; e.g., *endian* (end), *endode*, *geendod*. A third group of weak verbs consists of four important concepts: *habban* (have), *libban* (live), *secgan* (say), and *hycgan* (think). These actually show some variation in the stem vowel for the various tenses (e.g., *habban*, *hæfde*, *gehæfd*; *hycgan*, *hogde*, *gehogod*) but at least some of the forms in the present tense of these verbs share the stem-vowel of the past tense forms (first person singular *hæbbe*, second person singular *hogast*).

The conjugation of *fremman* will serve as a model for typical weak verbs:

PRESENT INDICATIVE

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First Person	ic fremme	wē fremmaþ
Second Person	þū fremest	gē fremmaþ
Third Person	hē, hēo, hit fremeþ	hīe fremmaþ

PAST INDICATIVE

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First Person	ic fremede	wē fremedon
Second Person	þū fremedest	gē fremedon
Third Person	hē fremede	hīe fremedon

PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First Person	ic fremme	wē fremmen
Second Person	þū fremme	gē fremmen
Third Person	hē fremme	hīe fremmen

PAST SUBJUNCTIVE

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
First Person	ic fremede	wē fremeden
Second Person	þū fremede	gē fremeden
Third Person	hē fremede	hīe fremeden

PRESENT PARTICIPLE

fremmende

PAST PARTICIPLE

gefremed

In addition to the strong and weak classification, there are a number of Old English verbs that must be considered anomalous. *Bēon/wesan* (to be) is one, involving as it does four separate stems: *bēo, bist, biþ, bēoþ* (present singular and plural); *ēom, eart, is* (present singular) and *sindon* (present plural); *sīe, sīen* (subjunctive forms); and *wæs, wære, wæron* (past singular and plural). *Gan* (go) is a second such verb, with its preterit forms built on the separate root *cod-* (surviving in Chaucerian times as *yede*), a root later to be displaced by the equally anomalous *went* (from Old English *wendan*, to turn). Another irregular grouping comprises the preterit-present verbs, so called because the present-tense forms derive from original strong preterits and weak preterits develop to fill the gap. *Witan* (to know) is an example: the present tense (ic/hē) *wat* and (þū) *wast* are in form first class strong preterits, and the past tense (ic/hē) *wiste*, (þū) *wistest*, (wē/gē/hīe) *wiston* with the dental *t* pattern like weak preterit forms.

III

By Chaucer's time, the English verb had in certain important respects settled into a pattern quite recognizable

to the modern student. The Old English plural inflection *-on* had become *-en*, with the *n* dispensable. The singular inflections *-est* and *-eth* remain, as they do into Elizabethan English. Thus, the fourteenth century conjugation of *ride* would involve only four inflections (*e, est, eth, en*) compared with seven in the Old English (*e, est, e, a, on, en, an*). Perhaps the most interesting single feature of the fourteenth century verb is the flexible state of the infinitive formation. The Old English infinitive indicator *-an* survives as *-en*, but the auxiliary *to* finds frequent employment. Thus, in the first hundred-odd lines of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* Prologue we find the following infinitive constructions, all of which would necessitate the inflection *-an* in Old English syntax:

Thanne longen folk *to goon* on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for *to seken* straunge strondes
(as infinitives governed by *longen, goon* and *seken* show both the old infinitive inflection and the new auxiliary *to*)

They wende,
The hooly blisful martir for *to seke*
(uninflected infinitive *to seke* governed by *wende*)

That toward Caunterbury wolden *ryde*
(as governed by *wolden*, the infinitive *ryde* shows neither auxiliary nor inflection)

And made forward early for *to ryse*
(auxiliary, no inflection)

fro the tyme that he first began
To riden out
(both auxiliary and inflection)

for *to tellen* yow of his array
(auxiliary and inflection)

He koude songes *make* and wel *endile*
(neither auxiliary nor inflection for infinitives governed
by *koude*)

for him liste *ride* so
(neither auxiliary nor inflection for infinitive governed by
liste)

Wel koude he *dresse*
(neither auxiliary nor inflection for infinitive governed
by *koude*)

Clearly, the language at this point has neither definitely discarded the inflection nor settled on *to*.

With the sixteenth century, verb usage is virtually stabilized in familiar modern terms, but there are certain exceptional areas. One is the third person singular, regularly *-eth* in Chaucer. The inflection persists in Elizabethan English but *s* is increasingly used and becomes standard in the early seventeenth century. Thus, Shakespeare's Portia says of mercy, "It *blesseth* him that *gives* and him that *takes*." In Shakespeare, too, we find a rather free structuring of participial forms, with the regular *-en* inflection for strong verbs discarded: "Have you *chose* this man" (*Coriolanus*); "And thereupon these errors are *arose*" (*Comedy of Errors*); "Then, Brutus, I have much *mistook* your passion" (*Julius Caesar*); "Thou hast *eat* thy bearer up" (*2 Henry IV*); "Writ in remembrance more than things long past" (*Richard II*). Strong and weak verb distinctions are sometimes tentative for the period; *waxed* and *waxen*, *sowed* and

sew, *helped* and *holp*, along with weak forms like *growed*, *shrinked*, and *swinged* testify to this. Finally, in the plays and poems of Shakespeare we note the formation of verbs from nouns and adjectives: "Which *happies* those that pay the willing loan" (*Sonnet VI*); "Such stuff as madmen *tongue* and *brain* not" (*Cymbeline*); "Which pitifully *disaster* the cheeks" (*Antony and Cleopatra*); "This day shall *gentle* his condition" (*Henry V*); "Lesson me" (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*). In the era of the Inkhorn controversy, the conservative-radical quarrel over vocabulary, it is fitting that its greatest writer should thus experiment in verb-thinking.