

ALLITERATION AND SOUND CHANGE IN EARLY ENGLISH

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Times 10/13 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data

Minkova, Donka, 1944–

Alliteration and sound change in early English / Donka Minkova.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in linguistics; 101)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 57317 3 (hardback)

1. English language – Middle English, 1100-1500 – Phonology. 2. English
language – Middle English, 1100-1500 – Versification. 3. English language – Old
English, ca. 450-1100 – Versification. 4. English language – Old English, ca.
450-1100 – Phonology. 5. English language – Phonology, Historical.

6. Alliteration. I. Title. II. Series.

PE540 .M56 2002

427/.02 – dc21 2002067213

ISBN 0 521 57317 3 hardback

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1 *Social and linguistic setting of alliterative verse in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval England*

The primary goal of this study is to establish and analyze the linguistic properties of early English verse. Verse is not created in a vacuum; a consideration of some non-structural factors that could influence the composition of poetry is important for our understanding of its linguistic dimensions. This chapter presents a brief overview of the social and cultural conditions under which alliterative verse was produced and enjoyed in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval England.

1.1 *The Anglo-Saxon poetic scene*

Verse composition was a foremost outlet of creativity and a cherished form of entertainment, moral edification, and historical record keeping for the Anglo-Saxons. When the Northumbrian priest and chronicler Bede (b. 672/673–d. 735) wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in Latin, the poetic rendition of important themes and events in the vernacular must have already been a highly prestigious undertaking. Bede tells us how Cadmon, an illiterate shepherd, found his inability to sing in company shameful. In a dream a stranger appeared urging him to sing the song of the Creation and he uttered “verses which he had never heard.” He was then taken to the monastery at Whitby where his divine poetic gift was tested and confirmed. He spent the rest of his life as a layman in the monastery, enjoying the fellowship of the abbes and the learned brethren, and composing more religious poetry.

Cadmon’s Hymn, as the original dream song is known (c. 657–680), is the only surviving piece of verse reliably attributed to the shepherd, and its literary value is minimal, yet the account of Cadmon’s miraculous endowment and the early date of the (Northumbrian) poetic specimen are of great historical significance. The story of the hymn and its survival in later versions and in other dialects testify to the existence of a section of society for whom verse was associated with loftier intellectual and spiritual experiences. The poetic skills of

2 1 Social and linguistic setting

a *scop*¹ were highly appreciated; crucially, it was not the lettered minority who were exclusively, or even primarily, entrusted with the *creation* of verse, though of course clerics were responsible for the existence of the poetic *records*.

In sociological terms this picture is, of course, overly romanticized. In terms of the value of verse as an evidential basis for the state of the language, however, the speech-based nature of alliterative composition cannot be overstated. Looking more closely into that issue, we can define three important characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon poetic scene which provide the relevant background for the linguistic study of the verse records. These are: (a) the centrality of verse as an artistic and social experience; (b) the coherence and relative constancy of the verse form throughout the period; and (c), the disjunction between the speech-based composition and delivery and the written preservation of the poems.

The story of Cadmon and his hymn is only one recorded episode highlighting the place of the poet in Anglo-Saxon society. Other poems, too, offer glimpses of the presence and prestige of the *scop*, the desirability of the gift of versification, and the value and high status of verse recitation as a form of entertainment. In the famously obscure early lyric *Deor* the eponymous poet describes himself as “dear” to his lord, and his long-time employment as “excellent”:

þæt ic bi me sylfum	secgan wille,
þæt ic hwile wæs	Heodeninga scop,
dryhtne dyre;	me wæs Deor noma.
Ahte ic fela wintra	folgað tilne ²

The poem was presumably composed as a lament for the loss of privilege, land, and favor to another *leoðcræftig monn* ‘a man skilled in song’; the sad consequences of the rivalry are embedded in a catalogue of possibly well-known stories of comparable worldly troubles. Most importantly, the plaintive

1. While the meanings of ‘singer, poet, minstrel, makar’ for the word *scop* are quite clear from the context in which the word appears in Old English, its etymology is unclear. The appealing connection with the verb *sceppan/scyppan* ‘to shape, to create,’ frequently remarked on by less-careful writers on this topic (for example Alexander 1966/1975: 16), is “fanciful,” according to the OED. The only likely connection of the word is with OHG *scoph*, *scof* ‘poetry, fiction’ (‘commentum’), ‘sport, jest, derision’ (‘ludibrium’), and ON *skop* ‘railing, mocking, scoffing.’

The root *scop* was very productive in Old English. Its adjectival form is *scoplic* ‘poetic, metrical,’ and it forms the compounds *sceop-cræft* ‘the poet’s art, poetry,’ *sceop-gereord* ‘poetic diction, the language of poetry,’ *scop-leoþ* ‘a poetic composition.’ The Latin root *meter* is used with reference to non-vernacular verse: *meter-fers* ‘hexameter verse,’ also *meter-geweorc*, and the gloss for *meter-lic* is *scop-lic* (*The Old English Glosses of MS. Brussels, Royal Library 1650*, 299).

2. ‘I will say that of myself, that I was once a scop of the Heodeningas, dear to my lord; Deor was my name. For many years I had an excellent following/service.’

tone of the short piece allows us to infer that mundane comforts and social prestige were accorded to those who were gifted versifiers. A similar theme appears in the final passage of *Widsith*, a Mercian poem also believed to be of a very early date. In that poem the traveling minstrel singing of heroic exploits is an adroit and sophisticated artist, who is aware of his role as a bestower and guardian of fame. Clearly, the versifiers functioned in a social atmosphere that was both generous and demanding, and their accomplishments were central to the spiritual self-esteem of the members of their circles. The *scops'* high status had to be maintained by artful manipulation of the language; it is therefore also reasonable to suppose that the appreciation of the verbal and auditory exuberance of their creations relied on shared linguistic resources and experiences.

The favorable position of the poet and the centrality of verse correlate well with other aspects of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition that point to its stability. In spite of the often discussed thematic divisions in Old English poetry, the corpus of verse that has survived is marked by common features which attest to a single tradition of versification from the seventh to the eleventh century. Seen as a continuation of the tribal continental habits of verse-making, the history of English verse might begin with a reference to Tacitus' *Germania*, which reports the existence of traditional hymns among the peoples of Germania. Although evidence of poetry in Old English is lacking for nearly a century after the conversion of King Aethelberht I of Kent to Christianity in 597, it is reasonable to assume that the production of verse continued uninterrupted in many communities. Though not monolithic in form, compositions from the earliest to the latest exhibit a remarkable stability of basic metrical and parametrical properties: number of ictus per line and alliteration. This would be unimaginable without the axiom of continuity, and continuity must draw on sustained cultural appeal. Where discontinuity appears, in the form of deviation from earlier verse norms, it is essentially a matter of matching new language forms to a stable metrical template; thus discontinuity is also a revealing metrical and linguistic heuristic for dating of the poems.

The survival and strength of pre-Christian verse, probably in the form of short pieces on pagan and heroic themes throughout Old English, is well established. Along with the Germanic character of the narrative themes in *Widsith* and *Deor*, the continuing interest in recounting heroic events in verse is suggested by the famous *Finnesburh Fragment* in *Beowulf*. Here, Beowulf's victory over Grendel is celebrated with communal song and music and the recitation of heroic lays, and Hroþgar's *scop* regales the mead-benches with the story of Finn's retainers. It is believed that *Waldere*, had it survived in a fuller form than

the two extant fragments, would be another prime example of heroic poetry.³ Although it allows only glimpses of what might have been a long epic poem, presumably composed during the eighth century, but recorded two centuries later, *Waldere* indicates that *Beowulf* “is not an oddity.”

Like the earliest heroic poems and *Cadmon's Hymn*, subsequent vernacular compositions bear the marks of Germanic verse: the four-stress line bound by alliteration, end-stopped syntax, the cataloguing of royal and divine genealogies. Thus, though the main bulk of the surviving Anglo-Saxon vernacular poetry is on Christian themes, Cadmon is just the first known practitioner, and Bede the first successful popularizer, of a native verse form which survived intact and flourished in a new intellectual medium. Old English alliterative versification as an art form thus spreads over both the mythological heroic themes and the scriptural, devotional, and monastic concerns of the Anglo-Saxons. The result is a wealth of valuable material: even the partial records that we have inherited indicate that the Anglo-Saxons created a body of poetry unparalleled in Europe before the end of the first millennium.⁴ Crucially, the poetic monuments bear out the assumption that throughout the period verse composition was both a “careful imitation of an old tradition and individual selection and inventiveness” (Godden 1992: 509).

The appreciation of poetry and its popular provenance and intellectual prominence in Anglo-Saxon times are topics which are constantly being enriched and elaborated, but they are also assumptions on which there is general scholarly consensus. That is not true of the vexed issues regarding the specific modes of creation and transmission of Old English poetry, on which academic opinions are divided and often bitterly controversial. The debate continues and it would be superfluous to rehash the arguments on either side.⁵ It is, however, relevant to the analytic goals of the study to clarify the reasons for my own approach to the nature of the evidential basis, and that includes some specific assumptions regarding the “orality” of the verse tradition.

The reconstruction of Old English poetry as a genre which has its roots in spontaneous speech-based events has a long and trustworthy history. As noted

3. See Pearsall (1977: 5–6), Godden (1992: 491–492).

4. After 900 Norse poets also combined rhyme and assonance with alliteration in a variety of forms. After 1000, Old Norse alliterative verse became practically confined to Iceland, where it continues to exist.

5. The “oral-formulaic” character of Old English poetry was first propounded by Magoun (1953). The resulting counter-claims and further arguments in favor of this position are covered in Olsen (1986, 1988). For a very judicious presentation of the arguments and a comparison of the “orality” of the vernacular tradition to the Anglo-Latin tradition of versification, see Orchard (1994: 112–125).

above, *Cadmon's Hymn* is considered one of the earliest datable poems in Old English, but the metrical form of the poem is an Anglo-Saxon realization of a shared Germanic lineage of oral poetry. Some of the most important topics and questions about the language of verse depend on the view that the creation of verse was not a precious and rarefied occupation within the cloistered seclusion of the monasteries, but a vigorous, direct, and informed involvement with the ambient language. The poetic records we have inherited are undoubtedly a “learned” product, the handiwork of lettered scribes, or they would not have come down to us. However, the monastic setting of manuscript creation did not preclude secular activities, and the community of monks was neither closed nor entirely spiritual. Young noblemen and lay scholars also lived in the monasteries.⁶ In a very material way some manuscripts themselves bespeak a collective effort in the creation of verse; they often fall short of being coherent texts generated within a single nervous system. Instead, they are likely to be the product of several minds not necessarily working in harmony and towards the same end.⁷ All of this supports the view that the poems reflect language intuitions and faculties that must have been shared by the *scops* and the scribes and their audiences. Even in the instances when a particular piece is provably a close translation of a Latin original, a native speaker's competence and feel for the properties of the vernacular underlies verse production. In that sense, for the linguist, the legitimate editorial worry about authorial versus scribal attribution of a text is not an issue of the same magnitude as for the cultural historian. Scribal and authorial testimony can be subsumed under the same speech-based umbrella as long as we are careful to isolate, wherever possible, obviously odd and uninformed mechanical interventions.

The premise that the poetic monuments we study are speech-based is compatible with the various composition scenarios proposed by literary historians. It is conceivable that some poems or portions of poems were composed on the fly, that some gifted individuals memorized passages and then dictated them to trained scribes, or that some passages or whole pieces were composed and written by the same individual. The “oral” nature and transmission of Old English poetry, as understood here, refers to the internalized phonological patterns common to all speakers of Old English and the realization of these patterns in verse. To the extent that languages exist independently of the writing systems that represent them, all forms of linguistic creativity, whether in prose or in verse,

6. The documentation of these claims for the early centuries of Old English can be found in Pearsall (1977: 20–21).

7. This point is developed fully in Moffat (1992), who also stresses the danger inherent in ignoring the individuality of scribal interventions in favor of a unified notion of “the Anglo-Saxon scribe.”

are “oral.” It has often been noted that the diction and syntax of the poetic compositions can differ significantly from the contemporary prose, for example, Godden (1992: 494). This is undoubtedly a valid consideration in the overall characterization of the language of Anglo-Saxon verse, but it does not preclude or contradict an interpretation of orality which refers to the matching of the auditory properties of language and verse. Stylized and archaic syntax and creative word-formation are powerful foregrounding components of poetry, yet the norm of the spoken language with respect to phonological patterns has to be observed for the tradition to be understood and continued.⁸

By itself, this permissive definition of orality is not interesting or illuminating. Applied to poetry, however, it acquires a more concrete significance. The obligatory attention to sound repetition and rhythm in poetry enhances the importance of the phonological properties of language; the genre itself mandates sensitivity to linguistic features and patterns which might elude a prose writer’s ear. Listening to verse lines, memorizing them, repeating and altering them are all necessarily auditory experiences, though to different degrees. Placed in its most natural context, that of a pre-literate society, the orality of poetry assumes yet another dimension: poetry was composed for the purpose of recitation; verse was composed to be delivered to and appreciated by *listeners*, not readers. The artistry involved in stringing words together in verse lines was not visual, but auditory. This is equally true of direct improvisation and of deliberate and careful penning of verse. The position taken here is therefore that alliterative verse was orally generated and transmitted, that alliteration served as an important mnemonic in its transmission, and that it is a valuable testimony of the shared linguistic intuitions of the poets and their audience. With this in mind, I will use the label “oral” as a synonym for speech-based composition where the evidence found in a poem reflects accurately the state of the ambient language.⁹

8. The interplay between the norm of the “standard” language and the traditional esthetic canon in poetry which requires foregrounding is discussed in Mukařovsky (1964/1970), from whom I take the concept of foregrounding as a violation of some linguistic norms for maximizing the intensity of communication.

9. This statement skirts the indeterminacy of authorial versus scribal text in Old English. I will return to the relationship between editorial work and alliterative evidence in chapter 3.4. For an eloquent and convincing justification of taking the verse evidence as an adequate source of philological and metrical reconstruction, see Fulk (1992: 6–65).

An interesting parallel to the “orality” of Old English verse is provided by the use of dictation in the production of Old English prose manuscripts, see Bierbaumer (1988) and the references there. Lass (1992a: 103–106) provides a phonologically based discussion of the association between oral delivery, pre-silent reading, and writing in Old English. He suggests that the reading *and* the writing praxis at the time were both essentially oral, and that much of the early writing is “utterance transcription.”

As will be argued throughout this study, the Anglo-Saxon poetic records provide strong support for the thesis that the language found in the poetry is a reliable source for the purposes of historical linguistic reconstruction. With respect to alliteration this position will be further defended in chapter 3. There are, however, aspects of the metrical structure of the classical Anglo-Saxon verse corpus, most notably the equivalence of two light syllables to a heavy one, known as resolution, which cannot be interpreted straightforwardly as grounded in the language. Though the *scops* may have created and recited their poems in the mead-hall, though their poems address a broad spectrum of heroic, courtly, religious, and secular themes which had to reach and impress an understanding audience, there was another side to the process. The recording, copying, and preservation of the compositions occurred within a monastic tradition of literacy, and most likely physically within a monastic environment.¹⁰ In that setting, it would not be surprising to find that certain restrictions on the metrical form do not readily match any of the prosodic structures in the contemporary language—resolution being the prime example of such artificially imposed metrical conditions. Such discrepancies between ambient language and metrical form cannot be sustained without specialized instruction, and it may indeed be the case that some scribes were better trained in the more arcane aspects of the craft than others. If this was so, then resolution (see chapter 2) was a purely metrical phenomenon, unsupported by the linguistic intuitions of the native speaker. This would be a reasonable way of explaining the disappearance of resolution after the Conquest. This is an interesting line of research, but it will not be pursued here since it interacts with alliteration only indirectly. Decisions on what constitutes alliteration and is therefore the core of my database lie outside the metrical and linguistic problems associated with resolution.

This study will refer to evidence found in the entire body of Old English verse. The Old English vernacular poetic heritage is part of the Germanic verse tradition which is commonly described as “strong stress” verse, and whose most distinguishing structural characteristic is the use of alliteration on the first fully stressed syllable in each half-line. The strategy of making alliteration the most central cohesive property of this kind of poetic meter is pervasive. It applies even to compositions such as the metrical translation of *The Meters of Boethius* (c. 897), *The Metrical Psalms of the Paris Psalter* (c. 950–1050?), also translated from Latin, and Ælfric’s alliterative prose (early eleventh century), all of which can otherwise deviate widely from the accepted structural norms. The poetic records comprise a finite corpus of approximately 32,000 lines, written

10. See Blake ([1977] 1979: 18).

between the second half of the seventh century (*Cadmon's Hymn*, c. 657–680), and the latter part of the eleventh century (*Death of Edward*, 1065, *Durham*, c. 1100).¹¹ In addition to numerous individual editions, the entire corpus is collected and annotated in the six-volume *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (ASPR)*. While arguably in need of replacement,¹² these volumes are still indispensable. All of the poetic records are now also incorporated into the on-line *Dictionary of Old English Corpus in Electronic Form*.¹³

Finally, as a background to the linguistic scene of the Middle English period, some comments on the position and artistic use of the Old English vernacular are in order. In Anglo-Saxon England, in spite of the strength of Latin within the scholastic sphere, Old English was widely used and highly respected as a language of many purposes: not just poetry, but also instruction, preaching, legislation. In versification, the Germanic preoccupation with alliteration, whether completely indigenous, or initially partially borrowed from Celtic, Latin, or both, flourished in the Germanic languages, and especially in Old English, beyond any comparison with adjacent traditions. In Celtic poetry, for example, alliteration was from the earliest times a prominent, but structurally subordinate, principle. The vernacular character of the alliterative tradition, its linguistic grounding, accessibility, and relative popularity guaranteed its dominance over other competing traditions. The famous historian of English poetry George Saintsbury said repeatedly that “Every language has the prosody it deserves”,¹⁴ whatever other absurd and unverifiable associations this statement evokes, it is true of the link between the prosodic cadences of the language and the structural use of alliteration in Old English.

An independent consideration of the properties of Anglo-Latin verse confirms the view that the Germanic type of versification was powerfully ingrained in Anglo-Saxon culture. As documented convincingly by Orchard (1994: 43–54), the direction of the influence on insular verse with respect to alliteration was clearly from Old English to Latin. Orchard shows how the Germanic model

11. The dating of the poems in the corpus here and elsewhere in this study is based on Fulk (1992: 61, 348 ff.). More recently, the dates proposed in Fulk's monumental study were confirmed independently by Russom (2002). On the reasons for classifying *The Death of Edward* and *Durham* as marking the end of the classical alliterative tradition, see Cable (1991: 52–56).

12. See Scragg (1988). Scragg recognizes the enormous scholarly achievement that the *ASPR* volumes represent, but he also points out that the current generation of Anglo-Saxonists would approach the task differently – an inevitable ageing process even for scholarly works of remarkably long and stable shelf-life. For the linguist the greatest obstacle in using the *ASPR* is the purist decision to forgo editorial insertion of vowel length marking.

13. The *Corpus* was compiled as part of the *Dictionary of Old English* project at the University of Toronto under the editorship of Antonette Healey.

14. See Saintsbury (1923: 404), where the statement is preceded by “I have said that . . .”

of alliteration was carried over into the compositions of Aldhelm (d. 709), with 73.5 percent of the verses in *Carmen Rhythmicum* showing alliteration. Aldhelm's student Æthilwald continued the trend with consistent alliteration of 63.0 percent to 66.6 percent in his later verse. These figures are more than three times larger than the respective figures resulting from an analysis of a comparable set of Hiberno-Latin octosyllabic poems. The unprecedented high frequency of alliteration in Anglo-Latin verse as compared to continental compositions in Latin is thus another indication of the pervasiveness and linguistic naturalness of alliterative verse composition.

It is quite remarkable that while English verse resisted the onslaught of the undoubtedly equally prestigious Latin verse forms, Irish verse adopted the structural features of the Latin hymns: syllable-counting, rhyming, variety of meters, presumably well before the ninth century. This is how Lehmann (1956/1971: 160–198) concludes his detailed investigation of the possible influences of Latin on the Germanic verse form:

When we review the changes in form which resulted from changes in influence we note either that these pertain to larger segments of form or that they bring to a conclusion changes which had been inherited previously. Nowhere do we find support for assuming that the essential modifications of small segments such as the poetic line are the results of importations.

By “larger segments of form” Lehmann means the superimposition of the long epic form on previously existing narrative material without any additional structural changes. New epic techniques were developed: expanded description of the setting; attention to historical background; fondness of the epic hero for monologues and accounts of earlier feats; yet the original alliterative stress line is kept intact. This importation of “larger segments of form” from Latin and Romance hit Germanic verse in two waves (1956/1971:163, 197): with the epic form in the eighth and the ninth centuries, and with the lyric, in the twelfth century. But the essential structural components of alliterative verse remained unchanged.

1.2 The post-Conquest poetic scene

The 1065 poem *The Death of Edward* is the last composition which can be described reasonably as belonging to the classical metrical tradition of Anglo-Saxon versification. Very revealing in this respect are the metrical statistics presented in Cable (1991: 54–55). His scansion shows one single unmetrical verse in the 68 verses of *The Death of Edward*, while on the other side of the

chronological divide the next extant poem with prominent alliteration, *Durham*, composed c. 1100, shows a very high level of unmetricality. In *Durham*, 38.1 percent of the forty-two verses fail to conform to the classical rules. Thus, while the cataclysmic effect of the Norman Conquest of 1066 with respect to changes affecting the phonology and morphosyntax of English can be questioned, the demarcation line in terms of versification modes seems clear. Powerful dramatic images have been conjured up to describe the demise of the Germanic tradition: for the literary historian “it dies choking on its own magnificence” (Pearsall 1977: 85), allowing the foreign models to fill the vacuum. For the historical linguist it “strangles itself” because of the clash between the prosodies permitted or required by an outdated poetic canon and the impossibility of such rhythms in contemporary speech (Lehmann 1956/1971: 202).

To what extent was this violent death inflicted by the new demographics and the shift of political power? Did the new cultural conditions affect the rate of production and the prestige of poetry as an art form? What is the connection, if any, between the Old English tradition and the reappearance of tightly structured alliterative verse of considerable artistic value in the fourteenth century? Finally, were the continuation and reinvention of strong-stress alliterative poetry hampered by changes in the native linguistic scene? Such issues regarding the setting and provenance of the Middle English material on which this study draws define the assumptions behind the empirical base and its formal characteristics. Therefore, before we look further into the metrical and linguistic formative elements of the post-Conquest poetic heritage, we need to set the discussion in the context of the social and linguistic circumstances for the creation of alliterative verse in Middle English.

Demographically, prior to the Norman Conquest of 1066 England was quite homogeneous: the majority of the population spoke some form of Germanic: Old English or Old Norse, and Celtic speakers made up a minority whose cultural presence is mostly inferential.¹⁵ As outlined above, the creation of vernacular poetry in Anglo-Saxon England was a communal linguistic undertaking.

15. The influence of Celtic verse models on English is doubtful. Saintsbury (1923: 24–25) mentions briefly the possibility of influence on English poetry from Irish and Welsh poetry, but he prudently abstains from concrete claims about borrowing from Celtic of specific elements of the verse line. While the shared historical background undoubtedly accounts for the use of Celtic sources in compositions such as *Lagamon's Brut*, the extent of the formal similarities between post-Conquest English verse and Celtic verse is limited to internal rhyming and intricate stanza arrangement. Awareness that the same features of verse could have been borrowed from French or Latin, however, leads Saintsbury (1923: 24, fn) to the statement that “... the Englishman of 1200 was certain to get his notions of rhyme from Latin or French, not from Irish or Welsh.”

Another argument which suggests that the English and the Celtic verse traditions must have developed largely independently comes from the fact that the Celts were extremely flexible

The verbal art experience was widely shared. Verse could be improvised, memorized, and recited by illiterate *scops*, but poetry could also be composed and modified by learned monks. The recording of verse was presumably fully in the hands of the monks, but poetry must have been enjoyed outside the lettered or the most privileged circles of society. Crucially, despite the prominence of Latin within the monastic scholarly tradition, the Old English language was widely used and highly respected as the language of art, instruction, preaching, and legislation. This situation set Anglo-Saxon England apart from the continental countries where vernaculars were hardly ever recorded and where Latin was the dominant language of learning and administration.

The Norman Conquest put an end to the social dominance of English speakers. "One may sum up the change in England by saying that some 20,000 foreigners replaced some 20,000 Englishmen; and that these newcomers got the throne, the earldoms, the bishoprics, the abbacies, and far the greater portion of the big estates, mediate and immediate, and many of the burgess holdings in the chief towns."¹⁶ The loss of political independence of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy and the influx of Norman monks following the posting of Lanfranc as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1070 severely undermined the standing of English and its use in writing. With small exceptions, for example, the continuations of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, all official record keeping reverted to Latin. The effect of Lanfranc's appointment has been described in terms of bringing the English Church "into line with the best continental practice."¹⁷ For two or three generations after the Conquest Latin reigned supreme as the language of historical writing. As has been repeatedly pointed out, the use of Latin, rather than French or English, for the purpose of writing must be attributed to its general acceptability as the language of scholarship, not to some disdainful attitude to the vernaculars. The extended use of a *lingua franca*, in this case Latin, is quite natural in situations of competing languages and bilingualism.

In addition to the resurgence of Latin, the linguistic situation in England during the first two centuries after the Conquest was further complicated by the physical coexistence of speakers of two distinct vernaculars, English and (Norman) French, the latter gradually evolving into an insular variety of Old French known as Anglo-Norman. Among themselves, members of the court

and adaptable in their versification practices. As early as the eighth century Celtic poets had abandoned their native system of poetry and had adopted features characteristic of the Latin hymns: syllable-counting, use of rhymes, variety of meters, see Lehmann (1971: 187). If we were to look for a direction of influence from Celtic to English, there would be no reason to delay that influence for upwards of three hundred years.

16. See Powell (1902), I. 346 in Traill and Mann (eds.) (1902–1904).

17. Stenton (1952: 210–211).

and those forming the aristocratic circles around it must have communicated in French. On the other hand, the mundane demands of daily life must have made the use of some English for the nobility and some French for their servants necessary and desirable. Theoretically, these are good conditions for the development of bilingualism. The spread of that phenomenon should be treated with caution, however: in terms of population statistics neither Norman French nor Anglo-Norman ever had the chance of being the national spoken language. According to some estimates, the Normans never made up more than 10 percent, generously, and as low as 2 percent of a population of 1.5 million. This demographic picture is drawn on the basis of calculations of the relative numbers of English and French speakers in the immediate post-Conquest period. The course of French–English relations in the post-Conquest period is uneven, with significant French reinforcements during King Henry III’s long reign (1216–1272); still the controlling majority of the population remained English-speaking.¹⁸

The numerically limited presence of non-English speakers in post-Conquest England is reflected in the massive survival of core phonological and morphosyntactic properties from Old to Middle English and the adaptation rather than straightforward adoption of some features of French. As a trigger of structural change, the mixture of languages in Medieval England was thus a rather restricted and socially circumscribed phenomenon. Yet by being also an upper-class phenomenon, multilingualism by definition affected disproportionately the recorded vocabulary, and the artistic and literary scene in Middle English. During the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries literary patronage and remuneration came from an aristocracy which, at least until the loss of Normandy in 1204, maintained strong ties with the continent. Paris was one of the leading centers of theological and secular learning and that is where the young members of the nobility went for their education. Old French remained the dominant language of instruction in the English schools until the middle of the fourteenth century. Legal affairs were conducted both in French and in Latin, but the language of communication among those who held the lands and commanded the prestigious social positions was some variety of Old French.¹⁹

18. On the demographic estimates see Lass (1987: 53–58). For details on the “flood of foreigners” in the thirteenth century, when “the country was eaten up by strangers” see Baugh and Cable (1993: 127–129).

19. See Kibbee (1991: 5–13) on the absence of official standing for French during the first century after the Conquest. For a more extensive discussion of the shift of “prestige” from English to Anglo-Norman, see Pearsall (1977: 85–89). Pope (1934/1961: 420–427) describes the external history of Anglo-Norman and proposes a periodization of the variety into “early” (the first fifty to sixty years after the Conquest) and “late.” For an excellent recent survey of multilingualism in medieval Britain, see Schendl (2002).

The importation and propagation of Norman French in post-Conquest England is the most dramatic single event in the history of English vocabulary. With two non-Germanic languages used extensively by most of the literate speakers in the country, it comes as no surprise that after the Conquest the vocabulary of English grew at a very rapid rate, with roughly 900 new words of Romance origin added to English before 1250.²⁰ An unprecedented bulk of about 10,000 Romance words was added to English before the middle of the fifteenth century. The introduction of new vocabulary items in any language may be a good measure of cultural influence, but, as noted above, in terms of its prosodic and morphosyntactic properties English remained English.

The Conquest changed the formal and thematic course of development of English verse. In that sense the demise of the classical tradition of alliterative versification is directly attributable to the new political and social conditions. When some form of a vernacular language re-emerged as a written medium, for verse or any other type of composition during the first century after the Conquest, it was first and foremost Norman or Anglo-Norman, the locally grown variety of Norman French. Poetry was written for and consumed by the inhabitants of the small courts, and the language of that poetry was Anglo-Norman.²¹ It is significant for the history of verse, however, that signs of rising national consciousness and pride in England, its traditions, and its language, on the part of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy began to appear already during the twelfth century. The picture that emerges is quite complex: the demographic balance remained staunchly in favor of English, yet within the centers of literary activity speakers of the Anglo-Norman variety of French drew on the native heritage and shaped the future of English verse. Moreover, while Latin had international currency and prestige and was recognized as the “proper” medium of historiography and law, and while Norman French was the default vernacular for those who were responsible for the creation of art, the English language and history continued to be regarded with respect and interest.²²

This brings us to the question of the place of poetry in the spiritual life of the country. Meter is a universal artistic extension of human language and some

20. The figures are from Baugh and Cable (1993: 164–174). Predictably, the “first-stage” borrowings recorded between 1066 and 1250 show a very high degree of phonological assimilation to English.

21. It is difficult to differentiate between Norman and Anglo-Norman works at first, but soon after the Conquest the settlers, often the younger sons of the aristocratic families, felt the need “. . . to establish themselves and demanded history and romance, as well as Lives of Saints, all of which dealt with the English past.” On this point see Legge (1963: 3–4).

22. See Stenton (1952: 269–270). On the European fame of English artistic accomplishments in illumination, embroidery, metalwork, etc. see Chambers (1932: lxx–lxxi).

form of verse constitutes an aspect of every human culture. The combination of the flourishing (southern) French *troubadour* tradition, with which members of the aristocracy must have been familiar, and the historical centrality of the literary arts in England, lends credence to an assumption that the composition and enjoyment of verse continued to be a favorite pastime. In the new social environment of post-Conquest England, however, few speakers of English would have had the leisure or physical access to the means of recording verse, even if there were a considerable bulk of it in existence. Unfortunately, very little of that presumed heritage from the first post-Conquest century has been preserved. The entire body of surviving English verse between *The Death of Edward*, a Chronicle entry for 1065, and *The Proverbs of Alfred*, c. 1175, consists of two short poems: *Durham*, c. 1100, a 21-line piece; and the 24-line poem *The Grave*, c. 1150.²³ Though metrically imperfect as compared to the classic Old English pieces, both poems are unmistakably alliterative.

The paucity of English poetic material, as compared to poetry written in French or Latin, has always presented a problem for those who try to connect alliterative writing after the Conquest to the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition. Why so little of this transitional alliterative material has survived is a characteristically intractable question in the historical reconstruction of the circumstances of creation and preservation of poetry. Still, several considerations argue in favor of an interpretation of continuity. The most tangible evidence of the strength of the alliterative model comes from the fact that some of the earliest verse compositions emerging in the second century after the Conquest, *The Worcester Fragments of the Soul's Address to the Body*, *Lagamon's Brut*, and *The Proverbs of Alfred*, are as unmistakably alliterative as the two short poems mentioned above. That is, in spite of the loosening of the metrical structure and the discernible effects of rhyme and syllable counting, when poetry in English reappears, alliteration persists as an important organizing principle of verse.²⁴ The strength of the popular poetic tradition is most clearly recognizable in the

23. The dating adopted here is based on Pearsall (1977: 294) and Cable (1991: 52–58). On the meter of *The Grave* see Saintsbury (1923: 28, fn. 1).

24. It seems clear that the proper source of the continuity of alliteration is to be found in the rhythmical prose of the period, see Blake (1969), Cable (1991: 41–65). Blake's proposal, now generally accepted, is based on a discussion of some salient stylistic features of *Lagamon's Brut*. These features strongly resemble and even replicate the features of prose works written in styles and rhythms reminiscent of the Germanic heritage, such as Ælfric's and Wulfstan's alliterative prose works which continued to be copied through the eleventh and the twelfth centuries. Rather than being interpreted as a continuation of the pristine Old English metrical form, transitional poetic texts in their alliterative sections represent an intermediary form, to which Blake (1969: 120) gives the label *rhythmical alliteration*.

Brut, which is based on an Old French source but still uses predominantly English vocabulary and relies on formulaic phrases that had been used in Old English, see Blake (1992: 509–512).

Another, admittedly inferential, argument for continuity comes from the uncertainties of recording and the hazards of survival of any English material in the early Middle English period. The great monastic houses, from which more materials have been preserved, were fully infiltrated by Anglo-Norman, while poetry in English was written in “the smaller houses” (Pearsall 1977: 90). A related point is that the copying of English poems was more likely to be a one-off, “special purpose activity,” while Latin and French manuscripts survived in multiple copies because of the prospective wider audience (Blake [1977] 1979: 16). What was interrupted for about a hundred years after the Norman Conquest in England was thus not familiarity with, exposure to, or composition of *some* form of verse, but the access of English speakers to formal authorial and scribal privileges.

Thematically, verse in which alliteration was a central feature had much in common with the more prominent Anglo-Norman verse tradition, but there is also awareness of the Anglo-Saxon heroic and homiletic literary links. So, continuity is evident also in the blending of various strands and the English heritage is on an equal footing with its competitors. The friars’ miscellanies where much of the early post-Conquest poetry in Latin, Anglo-Norman, and English is collected, make no distinction of class between the materials.²⁵ When during the late twelfth century English started to regain its pre-Conquest rank, it was quick to outstrip the popularity of Anglo-Norman as the language of official writing and the language of poetry and literary prose. Against this background the fourteenth century flowering of English alliterative composition did not happen *ex nihilo*; its linguistic patterns, if not all of its subjects, were supplied as much by the artistic predecessors as by its contemporaries. In summary, the position taken here, following Pearsall (1977: 90) is that “English was not immediately, if ever, cast out into the Western darkness.” In one form or another, the tradition of alliteration was sustained throughout the Middle English period and into the fifteenth century. Alliteration was widely used by the early Middle English versifiers, and it was possibly kept alive as a desirable poetic ornament continuously in some parts of the country. The reinvention of alliterative verse in the West and the South-west in the fourteenth century is likely to have drawn on a lingering perception of alliteration as an appropriate poetic device. It is difficult to imagine that the poetic masterpieces of the so called

25. This point is developed in Pearsall (1977: 90–95).

“revival” arose independently of the inherited appreciation of the mnemonic and artistic power of alliteration. Once again, Pearsall (1977: 84) makes this point forcefully:

It does not matter that we cannot trace direct lines of descent . . . we find instead, at the beginning of the fourteenth century new varieties of alliterative writing, not confined to the West, which bear continued witness to the inherent strength of the alliterative “continuum.” On this interpretation, therefore, the alliterative revival of the fourteenth century would not be an inexplicable reversion to the past but a prolonged and particularly splendid episode in the history of a *long, unbroken and powerful tradition*. (emphasis added)

As in many other instances when a dated event is conveniently chosen as a cut-off point in the periodization of a continuum, the Norman Conquest of 1066 is an appropriate point of reference only in a limited sense. Before the Conquest there was no strict syllable-counting, and there is no alliterative verse which follows the “classical” Anglo-Saxon versification rules after 1066, so the fashions and the specific forms of versification changed abruptly. In that sense 1066 is indeed a watershed year. On the other hand, the tenacity of alliteration and its continued linguistic grounding on either side of that watershed are beyond debate. The properties of language and the language-based properties of verse remained unaffected by the new sociopolitical and linguistic scene. Whatever changes occurred, and those were numerous, were part of an uninterrupted continuum. Whether the discontinuity of the classical alliterative rules is real, or whether the rift we encounter is just an accidental result of the physical loss of poetic compositions, is not of consequence for the analysis of the deployment of linguistic forms in verse.

The tenacity of English and the assumption of an uninterrupted alliterative lineage aligns the Old and Middle English traditions with respect to the information they offer to the linguist. This is the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section: were the continuation and reinvention of strong-stress alliterative poetry hampered by changes in the native linguistic scene? They were not; after a period of retrenchment alliterative poetry emerged as a vigorous and inspired artistic activity, well adapted to the changed language. At heart the products of the alliterative schools throughout Middle English remain traditional in the attention accorded to the optimal deployment of the acoustic features of language in verse.

Verse in English during the early Middle English period corresponded most closely to what can loosely be termed “popular literature.” The works written in the fourteenth century, especially those written in the northern dialects,

are also described as “popular.”²⁶ Therefore another notion that needs to be clarified is the popularity of the Middle English alliterative pieces. One type of “popularity” is a numerical measure of the production and consumption of poetic texts, a function of demand. In that definition, the fortunes of alliterative verse in Middle English were uneven: the bulk of surviving material increases sharply after the middle of the fourteenth century. Another type of “popularity” concerns the genesis and the audience of the poems. It is difficult to imagine that the illiterate peasantry would have had much need or use for refined verbal art, and in this context one can hardly describe the alliterative verse of *any* period in the history of English poetry as “popular.” Yet the vigorous social presence of English had its effect on the Medieval poetic scene by creating conditions for this type of “popularity” too. The language belonged not only to the unlettered and the uneducated; many members of the lower clergy and the parish priests must have remained monolingual English-speakers. They were the ones who maintained an uninterrupted tradition of alliterative homiletic prose in early Middle English. One of the most comprehensive poetic works of the very early post-Conquest period, *Lagamon’s Brut* (c. 1200–1220), was penned by a monk who was undoubtedly acquainted with and influenced by the alliterative heritage.²⁷ The conception, the goals, and the appeal of that type of writing can be described as “popular.” The popularity that can be invoked with reference to compositions in early Middle English should be read mostly etymologically – the poetic compositions were created by non-aristocrats, they were intended to educate the *populus*, the English-speakers. As noted above, this state of affairs is directly related also to the thematic content of the poetic documents which begin to appear in English towards the end of the twelfth century. They are didactic pieces and fall within a clerical tradition which Pearsall (1977: 89) labels “poetry of the schools.” The label refers to the possibility that the new compositions arose in the grammar schools, which were controlled by the monasteries, but, most importantly, serviced speakers of English.

The “popular” connections of the poems of the alliterative “revival,” the great historical romances, the religious and allegorical poems, have to be sought elsewhere. Leaving aside Langland, very little is known about the identity of the alliterative poets of the later periods. Presumably the adaptation of the French romances was accomplished by poets who either were aristocrats themselves, or enjoyed the patronage of aristocrats. Langland, on the other hand, could not

26. Oakden (1930/1968: 87).

27. The earlier date for *Lagamon’s Brut* is assumed by Cable (1991: 58), the later, by Pearsall (1977: 294).

have belonged to the landed gentry. What unites the whole corpus and makes it useful for linguistic purposes is the deliberate choice of English irrespective of subject-matter, and a choice of metrical form that draws on and elaborates the Germanic patterns which would have been most accessible to the monolingual English-speaking majority.

For the purpose of linguistic reconstruction, a critical aspect of these considerations is that the poets and scribes and their presumed audience shared the linguistic knowledge that underlies verse composition. Thus construed, the nature of the Middle English poems suggests that the language found in them corresponded closely to the contemporary vernacular. On the other hand, if copying of English poems was a “special purpose activity” in the early part of the period, rather than a stereotyped and routine job, the metrical form might be in jeopardy; deviations from some reconstructed norm of versification are to be expected. This could at least partially account for the lack of a single coherent metrical pattern to which the early works such as *The Soul’s Address to the Body*, *The Proverbs of Alfred*, and *Lagamon’s Brut* conform. The absence of familiar and agreed-upon norms is likely to lead to greater metrical and orthographic variety, obscuring the direct paths of prosody-to-meter matching. With alliteration, however, the ground is firmer because of the simplicity and naturalness of pairing sounds from a finite inventory. Another positive aspect of the “special” purpose composition and copying, admittedly more hypothetical than the other assumptions, is the fact that a non-routine scribal task would require more attention and thought, and possibly more careful adherence to one’s internal linguistic prompts.

Whether or not poetry after the Conquest continued to maintain “an energetic life,” whether it was “very strong on the lips of men” as claimed by Chambers (1932: 66–67), is a matter of speculation. Above, I highlighted some considerations showing that for the purposes of linguistic information the material is good enough.²⁸ On the other hand, when we do get to a period from which lengthy and substantial records exist, around the first half of the fourteenth century, the practice of composing, reciting, copying, and reading alliterative verse flourished in English. The metrical structure of the “revival” material is much more coherent, though there are significant differences between individual works that belong to that period. That does not imply that either the language

28. The hypothesis that continuity between classical Old English poetry and its Middle English alliterative counterparts should be sought in the Ælfrician alliterative prose is defended in Blake (1992: 512–513). For a metrically defined continuity of English in terms of strong stress and syllabism, as well as in terms of timing, see Cable (1991: 27, 151, *passim*).

or its poetic traditions had somehow deteriorated prior to the fourteenth century and were in need of being revived or repaired. Although “revival” is one of the common ways in which the re-emergence of strict alliterative versification is referred to, “renewal” is probably a more appropriate description. I use the word “renewal” broadly; it is the natural way in which languages and cultural traditions continuously replenish themselves at any time. The metamorphosis of the classical Anglo-Saxon verse line immediately after the Conquest was already mentioned: along with the disappearance of certain types of poetic compounds and the verse types that used to accommodate them, the metrical device of resolution was also abandoned.

It is worth noting that such changes are not a comment on the moribundity of alliteration and stress as organizing principles of verse. Poetic compounding and resolution had been specific and highly stylized features of the Anglo-Saxon verse form. Their disappearance in Middle English suggests that they were not linguistically grounded. The coinage of elaborate compounds is a choice available to speakers of any Germanic language at any time; the density of these in the classical poetic corpus of Old English is a matter of style and creative diction, not of language resources. Resolution disappeared because it was not understood by the antiquarians like Lagamon, or others who had some grasp of the structure of the Anglo-Saxon model. The balance between heavy and light syllables was essentially the same in the twelfth century as it had been in the eighth century, so there can be no linguistic reason for the abandonment of resolution. It was an artifice that could not and did not survive the Norman interruption. But neither the decrease of creative compounding nor the loss of resolution touched the core of the tradition. The fourteenth-century poetic documents are a “renewal” because new features were grafted onto the existing model. Among those new features were the strong tendency to alliterate on identical vowels, the so-called *Stab der Liaison*, vowel *:/* h-/ alliteration, */f-/* *:/* v-/ alliteration. These were innovations based on changes in the contemporary language; they were additions to a healthy understanding of stress and alliteration, not attempts at a resurrection of collapsed or dying literary objects.

It may be objected that the notion of “revival” rather than “renewal” is appropriate for the alliterative material of the late Middle English period because the introduction of rhyme and syllable-counting after the Conquest had relegated alliterative verse to relative obscurity. This may be so, but purely linguistically, the alliterative model of versification is always potentially lurking in a stress-timed language such as English. Whether it will surface or not is a matter of

literary taste. Similarly, the rise of a new tradition of syllable-counting verse was not primarily a matter of the language becoming more or less accommodating to a particular poetic form. There is no reason other than custom and fashion why the Old English poets did not use rhymes. The introduction of new versification modes in Middle English and the renewal of the old models was a culturally generated and sustained literary phenomenon, not a linguistically motivated repair strategy.

In what follows I will take the evidence from both Old and Middle English alliterative verse as equally solid and empirically verifiable. The deployment of alliteration at any point in the history of English verse provides a set of descriptive parameters within which linguistic hypotheses can be tested. The reference to statistical probability in the mixed verse immediately after the Conquest generates some difficult matching issues; I will address those in the appropriate places. Adumbrating the discussion of one specific text, *Lagamon's Brut*, from which evidence will be drawn in the subsequent chapters, I suggest that the transitional forms, precisely because they are free of well-defined metrical constraints, can offer prosodic insights not easily discernible in tighter structures.²⁹ As one moves closer to the greater metrical coherence of the fourteenth-century specimens, strict matching becomes once again a statistically testable basis for the reconstruction of various linguistic forms.

The evidential basis for this study encompasses the entire corpus of Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry, the early Middle English mixed verse, and the later Middle English alliterative compositions. Research in this area is by definition part of the literary history of English: intentionally stylized language involves literary and artistic creativity and the choices of topic and metrical form reflect important socio-cultural realities. Although I will refer constantly to the *formal properties* of the poetic texts, no *esthetic judgments* based on meter will be attempted or advocated here. Statistical regularity will be used as a basis for drawing linguistic conclusions, rather than as a basis for appreciation of the literary merits of a particular poetic piece. In any case, the association between metrical regularity and esthetic effect can be tenuous and unrecoverable, especially for some drab and obscure pieces, which are nevertheless linguistically valuable. References to "optimality" should be understood in the strict technical sense of "conforming to some pre-defined set of linguistically defined constraints." This is a disclaimer and not an apology; there is no "dehumanization" of poetry if its historical deposits are used as the mother-lode of rich linguistic knowledge.

29. This argument is fully developed in Minkova (1997a).

Finally, a note on the material that will not be covered in this study: I will not be concerned with isosyllabic rhymed verse. The Norman Conquest of 1066 is a convenient historical divide between two distinct modes of English versification: the alliterative and the syllable-counting. To parallel the widely used terminology on English stress assignment, the two models can be referred to as instantiations of the *Germanic* and the *Romance* traditions on English soil. The features which most saliently characterize the differences between Germanic and Romance meter are obligatory alliteration for Germanic and strict syllable-counting for Romance.³⁰ In addition, the two types overlap in that both show a preference for a fixed number of stress peaks per line, a tendency much more explicit in the insular form of isosyllabicity. Both traditions naturally also share the universally observed preference for loosening of constraints at the left edges of lines and strict observance of right-edge restrictions. Both traditions yield invaluable information about the structure of the contemporary language. The absence of any strictly syllable-counting verse in English before the end of the twelfth century weights the issue of “direction of influence” in the appearance of that specific verse feature heavily in favor of French, since the Latin syllable-counting models had been available to the monks before the Conquest. It may be worth noting that the same structural feature, syllable-counting, was adopted in Old Norse in the Skaldic verse tradition; if one variety of North Germanic could cope with that requirement, West Germanic could deal with it too. This brings us back to the balance and interplay between cultural and linguistic factors, borrowings and indigenous developments in the early history of English verse. The interaction of social and literary conditions and metrical and linguistic prosodic structures in the development of the isosyllabic verse form is a fascinating and promising research project which I will leave for the future. My goal in this study is to isolate and analyze structures unique to the Germanic-type versification, and my data have been collected from the alliterative corpus. The next chapter will survey the linguistic and metrical assumptions relevant to the analysis of the structural and phonological issues addressed in the remaining chapters of the book.

30. The terms Germanic and Romance must be understood as cover terms. Neither the individual Germanic traditions nor the various Romance traditions are internally homogeneous with respect to all their metrical properties. Russom (1998) offers an excellent comparison of the linguistic and metrical features in *Beowulf*, the Old Norse Eddic poems on native Scandinavian subjects in *fornyrðislag*, and continental (Old Saxon) Germanic alliterative verse. Duffel (1991: 329–410) provides a comparative treatment of the diachronic development of Romance verse traditions, the hendecasyllabic line in particular. As for Medieval Latin, from which the later vernacular traditions in the Romance languages evolved, verse was either based on syllable quantity as in Classical Latin or, in the later specimens, it was accentual.