

## *Introduction: What Was Alliterative Poetry?*

Alliterative poetry is first recorded in English from the late seventh century, which makes it the oldest poetry in this language. Surviving poems include several of the most admired works of medieval literature, including *Cædmon's Hymn*, *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Piers Plowman*. This is also a defunct poetry, having died out soon after the close of the period we call medieval, and it is a deeply mysterious poetry. It was christened “alliterative” in the eighteenth century, for the simple reason that it alliterates a lot. One wonders where this poetry came from, how it was organized, and why it died out. None of these questions has an easy answer.

The question of origins is difficult because alliterative poetry is the earliest recorded in any Germanic language. The alliterative meters of Old English, Old High German, Old Saxon, and Old Norse are clearly cognate, but scholars have as yet been unable to push this history further back. Whereas the Germanic languages can be placed within the larger Indo-European family, no comparable genetic placement has been possible for the earliest Germanic verse forms.<sup>1</sup> The verse forms of Common Indo-European are thought to have been syllabic and quantitative; Germanic verse has seemed unmoored from that archaic framework, distinguished from it by persistent alliterative patterning and especially by fluctuating syllable count. Though certainty is not possible, these peculiar features are usually attributed to the Germanic accentual system. At a pre-historic stage in the development of Germanic, accent became fixed on the initial syllable of words; the metrical forms then current among the Germanic peoples (whatever those may have been) were subsequently reorganized to take advantage of the new perceptual prominence of word onsets.<sup>2</sup> That change is usually taken to have been comprehensive, such that it wiped out all traces of the prior metrical system. The earliest surviving verse in Italic and Celtic languages seems to have been affected in similar ways by the acquisition of initial stress accent in these languages, though metrical

reorganization was evidently less comprehensive in early Irish verse than in Latin or Germanic.<sup>3</sup> To varying degrees, and with important differences in detail, accentual change yielded something we may call alliterative verse.

Details are obscure. What is clear is that English alliterative verse differs profoundly from the oldest verse forms reconstructed for the Indo-European language family, and differs as well from the accentual syllabic forms that one tends to think of as natural in English. The organization of English alliterative verse has puzzled modern readers since at least the first printings of *Piers Plowman* and Old English biblical poems, in the mid sixteenth and mid seventeenth centuries, respectively. It has been the object of organized inquiry since the emergence of modern philological studies at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Within this historical span, the past three decades have a special prominence. Research since 1985 has yielded achievements of theoretical formulation and empirical discovery rivaled only by the 1880s and 1890s, the decades that saw the publication of major studies by Eduard Sievers and Karl Luick.<sup>4</sup> The principal objective of this research activity has been to reconstruct the meter of the surviving poems: to determine how the poetry is shaped at the level of the line. The other two questions posed above – where the poetry came from and why it died out – have received less attention. In the final chapter of this book, I offer an account of the disappearance of alliterative poetry in English. The other end of the chronological spectrum probably remains beyond our grasp, at least for the present. There is, however, some reason to believe that the ground is being prepared for renewed efforts to reconstruct the pre-history of Germanic alliterative verse, and to clarify its relation to norms of verse-craft observed in other Indo-European traditions.<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of the 1980s, just prior to the current flowering of research, one described the long lines of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* roughly as follows: there are four (or four “major”) stresses per line, and a variable number of unstressed syllables distributed around those stresses; the first three stresses are joined with alliteration. About Lawman’s *Brut*, one modestly shrugged and noted that irregular alliteration co-exists with irregular rhyme.<sup>6</sup> About *Beowulf* and other Old English poetry, one could be more confident: Eduard Sievers’s “Five-Type Theory” stood as a reasonably accurate description of the repertory of prosodic contours employed in half-lines of Old English poetry. The “Five Types” did little, however, to explain why poetry should be organized in this way. More generally, each of these chronological variants of English alliterative meter appeared as under-regulated, even erratic, by comparison with English

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accentual-syllabic verse – and, indeed, by comparison with the other major traditions of premodern European poetry. Sievers's Five Types at least permitted Old English poetry to be read as having four major stresses per line, and this undoubtedly encouraged a four-stress interpretation of Middle English verse. The defining features of English alliterative poetry would therefore be alliteration, a fixed count of stresses, and a “gabble of weaker syllables, now more, now fewer.”<sup>7</sup> Absent a more articulate description – and faced with gaps in the historical record – many scholars have doubted whether Old English poetry, the *Brut*, and fourteenth-century alliterative poems belong to the same historical series.

All this looks different today, at least in the specialist literature. In Old English metrics, research progress is most evident in monographs by Thomas Cable, R. D. Fulk, Geoffrey Russom, and Seiichi Suzuki – a series of creative re-engagements with Sieversian formalism, differing from one another in their specific machinery of historical and theoretical linguistics, and in the relative priority they assign to the individual components of Sievers's theory.<sup>8</sup> For Middle English poetry, one has lacked any comparable starting point. Descriptive typologies, Sieversian in inspiration, were proposed by Luick in 1889 and by J. P. Oakden in 1930, but those efforts failed to sustain research programs in the way that the Five-Type theory did for Old English.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it was as renewed essays in typological description, closely corresponding to Luick's efforts a century earlier, that the current efflorescence of research on Middle English alliterative meter got its start. In the mid-1980s, Hoyt N. Duggan and Thomas Cable showed that unstressed syllables in fourteenth-century alliterative verse are distributed in patterns far more regular than Oakden and later scholars had recognized, at least in the second half of the line.<sup>10</sup> That rediscovery has proved immensely generative, serving as the point of departure for an array of further work, most notably by Russom, Nicolay Yakovlev, and a team at Bristol University consisting of Ad Putter, Judith Jefferson, and Myra Stokes.<sup>11</sup> Though grounded in typological description of the second half of the line (the “b-verse”), this current work makes a comprehensive reassessment of fourteenth-century meter, with especially productive attention to matters of phonology, stress assignment, and historical genesis. The crowning achievement of this research trajectory is Yakovlev's D.Phil. thesis, submitted at Oxford in 2008.<sup>12</sup> In this paradigm-shifting study, the main lines of recent research in Old and Middle English alliterative metrics are synthesized, extended with new empirical discoveries, and given a bracingly diachronic construction.

In this rapidly expanding research field, the present book intends two contributions. First, I set the work of the past three decades in a longer

historical perspective. The details of disciplinary history – that is, the specific paths taken by scholarship over the past two centuries – place limits on what can be grasped and known. My first objective is therefore to demonstrate, by way of some disciplinary history, why this verse form has remained so mysterious for so long.

My second objective is to render alliterative verse ever so slightly less mysterious. I offer descriptions of the Middle English incarnations of this meter, emphasizing matters of systematicity, historical development, and variant realization, and supported by empirical work presented here for the first time. Despite advances in the field of alliterative metrics, the perimeters of consensus remain narrow, and much of this book operates in contested areas. Among the claims defended here are the following:

- The most elementary and widely cited description of alliterative meter – according to which lines have four major stresses – is a misapprehension, accurate neither of Old English verse nor of Middle English verse.
- Lawman's *Brut* occupies a central place in the development of English alliterative meter, whereas Ælfric's rhythmical alliterating prose does not.
- The general prosodic principle of closure – a key formulation of Indo-European comparative metrics – operates in both halves of the Middle English alliterative line and was a principal factor shaping the development of this meter between the Old English and Middle English periods.
- Duggan's and Cable's typological description of the b-verse – the seminal discovery of the 1980s – is a theoretical formulation of the intermediate level, much like the Sieversian Five-Type theory: it may be derived from deeper phonological and metrical constraints, yielding a simpler and more powerful statement of the Middle English meter.
- Alliterative verse died out in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries because the meter became perceptually assimilated to the dominant accentual-syllabic system: it became impossible to hear alliterative verse for what it was, as a distinct metrical system.

My argument for these claims is conducted in part by examination of poems underserved in research to date, especially Lawman's *Brut*, *Piers Plowman B*, *Piers the Plowman's Creed*, and alliterative poems in rhymed stanzas. Recent research has focused most productively on *Gawain* and a group of about a dozen other poems that share an approximately congruent metrical style; these poems are sometimes termed the "formal corpus" of Middle English alliterative verse.<sup>13</sup> Preferential attention to this corpus has been justified as a research expedient; however, research progress places

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us in a good position to now expand the field of inquiry and undertake comparative work.

The remainder of this introduction consists in two sketches, corresponding to the two objectives laid out above. The first sketch is epistemological: I describe our contemporary distance from alliterative poetry and thus the conditions that frame our efforts to understand it. The second sketch is of the poetry itself: I present a baseline description of the late Middle English meter, as instanced by *Piers Plowman*. These two sketches are intended as points of departure for the explorations undertaken in later chapters. Chapter summaries are provided at the end.

Poets in medieval Iceland composed treatises on the form and language of their vernacular poetry. These treatises are instructive, but they were not written for modern readers, and they omit much that would be of interest to us. Moreover, the Norse and English poetries differ in points of detail, precisely where one would want clarification from a contemporary critic. English poets left no instruction manuals, and the earliest substantive remarks on the form of an English alliterative poem are notably unhelpful. In a preface to his 1550 editions of *Piers Plowman*, Robert Crowley observed that lines “haue thre wordes at the least in euerye verse whiche beginne with some one letter”; he gave several examples, assured readers that, “This thinge noted, the miter shal be very pleasaunt to read,” and passed on to other topics.<sup>14</sup> Langland’s first printer may well have understood more, but he did not have the inclination or vocabulary to express it. One must, then, confront the primary evidence of the poems themselves, as they are preserved in the documentary record: a family of metrical forms, spanning a long and inadequately documented period, discontinued at the end of the Middle Ages, and different from anything that succeeded it. These conditions of inquiry should be considered here at the outset.

First, there is the simple fact that alliterative verse died out. The decades following the 1348–49 plague witnessed a general surge in production of English-language literature, and alliterative poetry benefited from that. By the middle of the fifteenth century, however, the form was recessive in southern England, displaced there by the Chaucer tradition. The literary tastes of the metropole were not immediately followed in the north and west, where new alliterative poems continued to be composed into the sixteenth century, and older ones continued to circulate. In Scotland the form remained viable until late in the sixteenth century, but alliterative verse had no chance of surviving the 1603 transplant of James Stuart’s court from Edinburgh to London.<sup>15</sup> The deselection of alliterative verse was a complex and protracted process; it stretched over several centuries and did

not proceed in a linear fashion. Once deselection was complete, however, the meter became as inaccessible as a dead language.

Among the accentual-syllabic forms that succeeded alliterative verse, the anapestic or triple meter bears a superficial resemblance. Robert Crowley's line "If bokes may be bolde / to blame and reproue" instances a rhythm that one also encounters in some lines of Middle English alliterative verse.<sup>16</sup> I consider the resemblance later in this introduction and again in Chapter 5; it provides some insight into how alliterative verse died out. The point to emphasize now, however, is that English accentual-syllabic meters and the metrical theories constructed to explain them supply no very reliable basis from which to reconstruct the workings of *Gawain* or *Piers Plowman*, much less *Beowulf*. When applied to alliterative verse, the theoretical constructions of generative metrics quickly reveal their accentual-syllabic biases.<sup>17</sup> The differences between alliterative and accentual-syllabic meters in English constitute a second major challenge to reconstruction of the alliterative meters.

A third challenge derives from the extraordinarily long life of alliterative verse in English. The English language underwent profound changes between the seventh century and the sixteenth. So, too, did the verse form. As a consequence, there are problems of periodization and typology. Should one speak of alliterative meter or meters? If the latter, where and how does one draw lines of division? Related to these problems of periodization and typology is another, concerning poetic language and the historical dimension of metrical systems. Alliterative meter was never fully in sync with itself; it had a way of distorting time, retaining linguistic forms after they had fallen out of the surrounding language, and retaining asystematic vestiges of its prior configurations. Each state of the meter was constituted from some combination of vestiges, innovations, and continuities. These problems are introduced at the end of Chapter 2, and pursued in each of the following chapters. I will distinguish three successive states of English alliterative meter, exemplified by *Beowulf*, Lawman's *Brut*, and *Gawain*. Chronologically intermediate compositions show a blending of features, while poems in each state of the meter show considerable variety in metrical style. Some rhymed and late poems indicate that the meter was undergoing another transformation in the period when it was swallowed up into the accentual-syllabic tradition of English poetry.

Finally, the material records of composition are distributed very unevenly, clustering in the periods 950–1050 and 1390–1475, with a thinner web of documentation extending earlier and later.<sup>18</sup> The result is an especially acute case of an epistemological problem inherent to historical inquiry: to

distinguish the past from the surviving evidences of it. Continuities at the level of metrical system show that verse composition must have persisted across gaps in the manuscript record. (This will be argued in Chapter 3.) The two periods that left the richest documentation – c.1000 and the fifteenth century – were periods that saw an uptick in production and copying of literature in English generally. The result, however, is that we have unusually rich snapshots of the meter over these two stretches of its longer history. The surviving copies of poems composed between, perhaps, the eighth and tenth centuries, and again between the mid fourteenth century and the mid fifteenth, necessarily serve as anchors for interpretation of the less numerous documents that constellate the longer tradition.

Here, then, is the object of inquiry: a lengthy and internally differentiated tradition of verse composition, poorly attested, defunct, and sharply different from the forms that came after it. Nevertheless, we know quite a bit. In the remainder of this introduction I offer a capsule description of the fourteenth-century meter, and situate this within the longer chain of developments. I relegate controversy and most supporting documentation to later chapters, for which this description will serve as a point of reference.<sup>19</sup>

Rules capture a practice from the outside, in pieces, and frozen in time. They miss its dynamic and interior unity. Although the difference may appear slight, we would do better to approach the fourteenth-century meter as a system of interdependent organizing principles:

1. **Bipartite line structure.** The poetry is composed of paired half-line units, shaped like and often corresponding to units of syntax.
2. **Grammatical category.** The metrical value of words is a function of their grammatical class.
3. **Accentual contour.** Metrical pattern is realized as an accentual contour, an arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables.
4. **Closure.** Metrical pattern is defined most sharply at the right edge, or coda, of metrical units.
5. **Segmental cueing.** Alliteration sharpens the legibility of the meter by cueing metrical stresses.

A discursive presentation is necessarily sequential, introducing the component parts one by one, yet the components function only in coordination, as elements of the completed system. Provided that this is understood, the point of entry into the system is not of great consequence, yet it would also be a mistake to imagine that the elements all have the same status. Of the five just listed, the first two – bipartite line structure and grammatical

word class – are foundational to alliterative verse throughout its long history. The third and fourth – accentual contour and closure – had important roles throughout, but operate most powerfully in the Middle English phase. The fifth element, alliteration, improves the legibility and coherence of the other four. It is best treated last.

Alliterative poetry is built up from commensurate chunks of linguistic material. In Middle English verse, lines are typically end-stopped, which means that the basic formal unit is also a unit of sense and syntax. Lines are further divisible into two short verses, or half-lines. In many manuscript copies, the division between half-lines is punctuated by a point, slash, or *punctus elevatus*. This scribal practice was retained by Walter Skeat; some later editors of Middle English alliterative verse have marked the half-line boundary with a tabbed space, the typographical convention used in modern editions of Old English poetry. The punctuation supplied by scribes and editors is, in any case, only a cue to an inherent structure. The opening lines of *Piers Plowman* illustrate the centrality of bipartite line structure to the entire metrical system. I quote from J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre's edition of the B archetype. The half-line boundary is punctuated with a raised point, the mark used for that purpose by the scribe of the base manuscript:

In a somer seson · whan soft was the sonne  
 I shope me in[to] shroudes · as i a shepe were  
 In habite as an heremite · vnholý of workes  
 Went wyde in þis world [-] wondres to here  
 Ac on a May mornýng · on Maluerne hulles  
 Me byfel a ferly · of fairy me thou<sup>3</sup>te  
 (Bx Prol.1–6)

The first half-lines (“a-verses”) convey the core sense and narrative action. Indeed, a-verses in this passage make sense on their own: “In a summer season, I dressed myself in garments – in the habit of a hermit – [and] went far in the world. But on a May morning I saw something special.” The second half-lines, or b-verses, contribute modifying material: subordinate clauses and adjectival and prepositional phrases. They enrich and complicate the sense of this passage, but they become meaningful only in combination with the a-verses.<sup>20</sup> In these opening lines, Langland conforms to the traditional style of Middle English alliterative poetry: the a-verse is heavier and more substantive than the b-verse.

Elsewhere in *Piers Plowman*, the trick of reading only a-verses will often fail. Consider, for example, the lines from later in the B Prologue, in which Langland introduces an angel who speaks a Latin warning to the King:

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And sithen in þe eyre an hiegh · an angel of heuene  
 Lowed to speke in latyn · for lewed men ne coude  
 Iangle ne iugge · þat iustifie hem shulde  
 But suffren & seruen

(Bx Prol.128–31a)

In contrast with the opening lines, the b-verses here deliver syntactically essential material. The grammatical subject – *an angel* – is contained in the first b-verse of the sentence. In a second contrast with the opening lines, these are not invariably end-stopped. Line 129 ends in an auxiliary verb whose dependent infinitives are placed in the following a-verse. The next b-verse, “that iustifie hem shulde,” supplies an object-clause for the verbs *jangle* and *jugge*. The main line of thought resumes (and concludes) in 131a: “And then, up high in the air, an angel of heaven descended to speak in Latin so that uneducated people would not be able to dispute or challenge those who must govern them, but instead submit and serve.”<sup>21</sup> The sentence rather unusually ends mid-line; 131b, not quoted above, is a syntactically independent introduction to the angel’s subsequent speech: “for-thi seyde þe angel / Sum Rex sum Princeps · neutrum fortasse deinceps” (Bx Prol.131b–132).

One finds similarly intricate syntax in the confession of Wrath, later in the *visio*:

I am wrath quod he · I was sum-tyme a frere  
 And þe couentes Gardyner · for to graffe ympes  
 On limitoures and listres · lesynges I ymped  
 Tyl þei bere leues of low speche · lordes to plese  
 And sithen þei blosmed obrode · in boure to here shriftes  
 And now is fallen þer-of a frute · þat folke han wel leuere  
 Schewen her schriftes to hem · þan shryue hem to her persones

(Bx.5.138–44)

Here Langland’s handling of half-line units gives an erratic energy to his indictment of fraternal abuses. Wrath’s brusque self-identification and the accompanying inquit clause (“quod he”) compose a metrical unit with complete syntax: the confession threatens to conclude mid-line, before it properly begins. The inquit clause governs the remainder of the passage, but 138b opens a new sentence, which again ends mid-line, at the end of 140a: “I was once a friar and gardener of the convent to graft scions onto mendicants and preachers.” The particle *for* in 139b provides a correct accentual pattern in this half-line (more on that shortly), but also directs us to read the half-line as a purpose clause (MED, “for, *prep.*,” 5b). Wrath was made convent gardener to perform arboreal surgery; he performed

this duty not on the convent's fruit trees, but on its members themselves. The peculiar target of Wrath's grafting is revealed only in 140a, in a prepositional phrase that must be construed closely with the preceding b-verse (to graft x on y), but which discloses, with characteristically Langlandian slyness, that we are now enveloped in metaphor. Having announced the metaphor by identifying one of its constituent elements, Wrath doubles back in anaphora to assign metaphorical value to the other principal element, the *ympes* that he grafted onto the rootstock-friars: those *ympes* were lies. Thus completed, the metaphor acquires a sort of vegetable life; in subsequent lines it grows into one of Langland's brilliant "embryonic allegories," drawing mischievously on stock elements of mid-fourteenth-century antifraternal satire.<sup>22</sup> The fruit of Wrath's grafting is not that lords' daughters become pregnant (as antifraternal satire might lead one to expect), but that the sacrament of confession is corrupted: "folke han wel leuere / Schewen her schriftes to hem" – that is, to friars – "þan shryue hem to her persones." The verb phrase is split across 143b and 144a, a sharp enjambment that, for the second time in this brief passage, vaults a key expository point into syntactic and metrical prominence.

These three passages should suffice to show how the half-line functions as Langland's basic unit of composition, and to show the expressive range that it afforded to him. The half-line is a properly "grammetrical" entity, fusing meter and grammar.<sup>23</sup> As such, it is also the domain within which the next three principles of composition – grammatical word class, accentual contour, and closure – mesh with one another.

The principle of grammatical word class means that metrical stresses (or "lifts," or "strong metrical positions") are normally supplied by the same classes of words that convey the core denotational sense of a passage. This feature is peculiar, and has not gone unchallenged in modern scholarship. It distinguishes alliterative meters from the accentual-syllabic meters that succeeded them in English. Nevertheless, the metrical function of word class in Middle English alliterative verse is supportable on historical grounds, folds neatly into an overall description of the meter, and may be schematized in broader linguistic terms. The basic distinction is between words that serve primarily to establish the surface structure of an utterance (that is, "grammatical" or "function words"), and words that convey its denotational sense ("lexical" or "content words"); most lifts are contributed by the latter category. The significance of this principle is immediately apparent if one compares the passages from *Piers Plowman* just quoted above with a passage of contemporary accentual-syllabic verse. Here I indicate the nucleus of syllables in strong positions with an acute accent: