ENGLISH ALLITERATIVE VERSE

*English Alliterative Verse* tells the story of the medieval poetic tradition that includes *Beowulf*, *Piers Plowman*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, stretching from the eighth century, when English poetry first appeared in manuscripts, to the sixteenth century, when alliterative poetry ceased to be composed. Eric Weiskott draws on the study of meter to challenge the traditional division of medieval English literary history into ‘Old English’ and ‘Middle English’ periods. The two halves of the alliterative tradition, divided by the Norman Conquest of 1066, have been studied separately since the nineteenth century; this book uses the history of metrical form and its cultural meanings to bring the two halves back together. In combining literary history and metrical description into a new kind of history he calls ‘verse history,’ Weiskott reimagines the historical study of poetics.

**Eric Weiskott** is Assistant Professor of English at Boston College. In addition to publishing widely on alliterative verse and early English literary history in journals such as *Anglo-Saxon England*, *ELH*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Modern Philology*, *Review of English Studies*, and *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, Weiskott is also a practicing poet. Most recently, his poems have appeared in *burnt-district*, *Cricket Online Review*, and *paper nautilus*. His first poetry chapbook was *Sharp Fish* (2008). With Irina Dumitrescu, he has co-edited a volume of essays with the working title *Early English Poetics and the History of Style*. 
This series of critical books seeks to cover the whole area of literature written in the major medieval languages – the main European vernaculars, and medieval Latin and Greek – during the period c. 1100–1500. Its chief aim is to publish and stimulate fresh scholarship and criticism on medieval literature, special emphasis being placed on understanding major works of poetry, prose, and drama in relation to the contemporary culture and learning which fostered them.

Recent Titles in the Series
Martin Eisner Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature: Dante, Petrarch, Cavalcanti, and the Authority of the Vernacular
Emily V. Thornbury Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England
Lawrence Warner The Myth of “Piers Plowman”
Lee Manion Narrating the Crusades: Loss and Recovery in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature
Daniel Wakelin Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375–1510
Jon Whitman (ed.) Romance and History: Imagining Time from the Medieval to the Early Modern Period
Virginie Greene Logical Fictions in Medieval Literature and Philosophy
Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen (eds.) The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches
Tim William Machan (ed.) Imagining Medieval English: Language Structures and Theories, 500–1500

A complete list of titles in the series can be found at the end of the volume.
To my parents
Contents

List of Figures  ix
Acknowledgments  x
List of Abbreviations  xii
Evolution of the Alliterative B-Verse, 650–1550  xiv

Introduction: The Durable Alliterative Tradition  1

1 Beowulf and Verse History  23
   The Evolution of Alliterative Meter, 950–1100  24
   Verse History and Language History  32
   Beowulf and the Unknown Shape of Old English
      Literary History  44

2 Prologues to Old English Poetry  53
   Old English Prologues and Old English Poetic Styles  53
   The Beowulf Prologue and the History of Style  66

3 Lawman, the Last Old English Poet and the First
   Middle English Poet  71
   Lawman and the Evolution of Alliterative Meter  72
   Lawman at a Crossroads in Literary History  79

4 Prologues to Middle English Alliterative Poetry  93
   The Continuity of the Alliterative Tradition, 1250–1340  94
   Excursus: Middle English Alliterating Stanzaic Poetry  103
   Middle English Prologues, romance, and Middle English
      Poetic Styles  106

5 The Erkenwald Poet’s Sense of History  127
   A Meditation on Histories  128
   St. Erkenwald and the Idea of Alliterative Verse in Late
      Medieval England  136
   Authors, Styles, and the Search for a Middle English Canon  145
Contents

6  The Alliterative Tradition in the Sixteenth Century  148
    The Alliterative Tradition in its Tenth Century  148
    Unmodernity: The Idea of Alliterative Verse in the Sixteenth Century  157
    Conclusion: Whose Tradition?  168

Note to the Appendices  174
Appendix A. Fifteen Late Old English Poems Omitted from ASPR  175
Appendix B. Six Early Middle English Alliterative Poems  180
Appendix C. An Early Middle English Alliterative Poem in Latin  183
Glossary of Technical Terms  187
Notes  190
Bibliography  210
Index  228
Figures

1. Datably Late Old English Poems in Alliterative Verse History  page 33
2. Select Datably Late Old English Poems in (Reverse) Alliterative Verse History  40
3. Prologues to Old English Poems  54
4. Prologues to Middle English Alliterative Poems  109
5. Prologues to Select Non-Alliterative Middle English Poems  114
6. The Pasts, Presents, and Futures of St. Erkenwald  130
Acknowledgments

In the course of writing this book I have benefited from the advice and guidance of mentors, colleagues, and friends. My first debt of gratitude is to Roberta Frank, whose erudition and good humor have been abiding resources. Jessica Brantley, Ardis Butterfield, Ian Cornelius, Paul Freedman, Ben Glaser, Alastair Minnis, and Denys Turner helped me conceptualize and revise the 2014 Yale University dissertation that forms the kernel of this book. While at Yale, I shared seminars, ideas, friendships, and in two cases apartments with Anya Adair, Abbey Agresta, Mary Kate Hurley, Andrew Kraebel, Geoff Moseley, Madeleine Saraceni, Anne Schindel, Joe Stadolnik, Arvind Thomas, Emily Ulrich, and Aaron Vanides, among others. Part of the research for Chapter 4 was completed under the auspices of the H. P. Kraus Fellowship in Early Books and Manuscripts at the Beinecke Library in 2013. I am grateful for the focused time in the archives.

Boston College is a wonderful place to work and a wonderful place to finish a book. Robert Stanton, my medievalist colleague in the English Department, is a beacon of collegiality and good advice. I am fortunate to have so many learned and generous colleagues. Those who encouraged me in the final stages of this project include Amy Boesky, Mary Crane, Rhonda Frederick, Dayton Haskin, Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, Adam Lewis, Suzanne Matson, and Andrew Sofer. Part of the research for Chapter 6 was completed through a Boston College Research Expense Grant in 2015, for which I am grateful.

I continue to profit from conversations with a number of other colleagues and friends in the fields of medieval literature and poetics, especially Tom Cable, Irina Dumitrescu, Tony Edwards, Will Eggers (my first teacher in medieval literature), Natalie Gerber, Alex Mueller, Nick Myklebust, Ryan (R. D.) Perry, Carla Thomas, and Elaine Treharne. They have consistently enriched my thinking and sustained my optimism about the academic profession.
I presented modified excerpts from this book at the following conferences, whose organizers and attendees I warmly thank: the 7th International Layamon Conference in Paris in 2012; the 48th and 50th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, MI in 2013 and 2015; the American Comparative Literature Association 2014 Meeting in New York; the MLA Annual Convention in Vancouver in 2015; Poetry by the Sea in Madison, CT in 2015; the Sixth International Piers Plowman Society Conference in Seattle in 2015; and the New England Medieval Conference in Boston in 2015. I presented a draft of Chapter 6 at the Harvard English Department Medieval Colloquium in 2014. My gratitude to Helen Cushman and Erica Weaver for the invitation.

I thank Linda Bree and Alastair Minnis (again) for expertly seeing this project through all phases of the editorial process at Cambridge.

Finally, I thank my parents, Roberta Garris and Jack Weiskott, for their love and support, and for a tattered copy of F. N. Robinson’s Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, which initiated me into a new literary universe; my brother Carl, for asking the big questions; and my wife, Sofia Warner, for all the love and patience. I owe my family more than I am able to say. This book is small recompense for their kindness.


EBW
Abbreviations

ASE  Anglo-Saxon England
ASPR  Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. Krapp and Dobbie
CR  Chaucer Review
DOE  Dictionary of Old English
ES  Extra Series
OS  Original Series
SS  Supplementary Series
EME Early Middle English
ES English Studies
JEGP Journal of English and Germanic Philology
L Latin
LC Literature Compass
LSE Leeds Studies in English
MÆ Medium Ævum
ME Middle English
MED Middle English Dictionary
MLQ Modern Language Quarterly
MP Modern Philology
N&Q Notes & Queries
NIMEV Boffey and Edwards, A New Index of Middle English Verse
OE Old English
OED Oxford English Dictionary
OF Old French

xii
List of Abbreviations

ON  Old Norse
PMLA  Publications of the Modern Language Association
RES  Review of English Studies
SIP  Studies in Philology
YLS  Yearbook of Langland Studies
### Evolution of the Alliterative B-Verse, 650–1550

- **p:** verbal prefix or negative particle omitted from meter by the prefix license
- **S:** lift
- **x:** an unstressed syllable in a dip

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English (c. 650–950)</th>
<th>Early Middle English (c. 950–1250)</th>
<th>Middle English (c. 1250–1550)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pSx(x ...)Sx (A)</td>
<td>xSx ... xSx (1)</td>
<td>&quot;&quot;, later xSx ... xS(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x(x ...)SpSx (C)</td>
<td>x ... xSxSx (2)</td>
<td>&quot;&quot;, later x ... xSxS(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sx(x ...)Sx (A)</td>
<td>Sx ... xSx (3)</td>
<td>&quot;&quot;, later Sx ... xS(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x(x ...)SxS (B)</td>
<td>x ... xSxS (4)</td>
<td>x ... xSSx, later x ... xSxS(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x(x ...)SSx (C)</td>
<td>x ... xSSx (5)</td>
<td>&quot;&quot;, later x ... xSS(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSSx (A/D)</td>
<td>b-verse patterns</td>
<td>&quot;&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSSS (D/E)</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sx(x ...)SS (A/E)</td>
<td></td>
<td>with more than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x(x ...)SSS (B/C)</td>
<td></td>
<td>two lifts (rare)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSSS (A/D/E)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

=xiv