The poetry we call “alliterative” is recorded in English from the seventh century until the sixteenth, and includes Cædmon’s Hymn, Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Piers Plowman. These are some of the most admired works of medieval English literature, and also among the most enigmatic. The formal practice of alliterative poets exceeded the conceptual grasp of medieval literary theory; theorists are still playing catch-up today. This book explains the distinctive nature of alliterative meter, explores its differences from subsequent accented-syllabic forms, and advances a reformed understanding of medieval English literary history. The startling formal variety of Piers Plowman and other Middle English alliterative poems comes into sharper focus when viewed in diachronic perspective: the meter was in transition; to understand it, we need to know where it came from and where it was headed at the moment it died out.

IAN CORNELIUS is Edward Surtz, S.J., Associate Professor in the Department of English at Loyola University Chicago. His other work includes essays on Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy, the medieval disciplines of grammar and rhetoric, the English Rising of 1381, and Piers Plowman. He previously taught at Yale University.
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RECONSTRUCTING ALLITERATIVE VERSE

The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter

IAN CORNELIUS

Loyola University Chicago
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Acknowledgments

My studies of alliterative poetry and the Latin language arts began while a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. Research leading to the present book began during a year's leave from duties at Yale University; I thank colleagues in the Department of English for their support and interest in my work. Draft versions have benefited from the intelligence of many readers, among whom I single out for special mention Ardis Butterfield, Thomas Cable, Ben Glaser, Eric Weiskott, and the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. A version of Chapter 2 was published in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*; it appears here in substantially revised form. Mary Raschko and Elizabeth Schirmer drew my attention to *Piers the Plowman's Creed* and supplied helpful comments on a draft version of Chapter 4. Thomas Cable and Eric Weiskott generously supplied material in press. Georgina Boyle's skillful copyediting improved my text immensely. For their elegant and attentive typesetting, I thank the production team, headed by Dawn Preston, at Out of House Publishing. I am honored to see this book through press as a member of the Department of English at Loyola University Chicago. I thank my colleagues here for their confidence and warm welcome. My gratitude to Linda Bree and Alastair Minnis for their commitment to this book, and to Rita Copeland, Roberta Frank, and Ralph Hanna for their inspiration and friendship. No one mentioned here should be held responsible for errors, which are my responsibility alone. I dedicate this book to my teachers.
Notes on the Text

The abbreviations on pp. ix–x identify preferred editions of primary texts cited frequently. Full bibliographic references are provided at the end of this volume. Translations of *Beowulf* follow R. D. Fulk, ed. and trans., *The “Beowulf” Manuscript: Complete Texts; and “The Fight at Finnsburg,”* Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). Other unattributed translations are mine.

In quotations of alliterative verse, I mark the caesura, or half-line boundary, with a raised point, regardless of the editorial or scribal punctuation: for example, “In a somer seson · whan soft was the sonne.” In scansions, a strong position may be marked by an acute accent, or bold type, or an “S.” The following are equivalent notations of metrical structure:

In a sómer séson · whan sóft was the sónne
In a *somer* *seson* · whan *soft* was the *sonne*
xxŚxŚx · xŚxxxŚx

In the third notation, “x” represents a weak syllable. Scansions are of words, not spellings; the word here spelled *soft* is assumed to be disyllabic, with an etymologically justified weak final syllable.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASPR</td>
<td>Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. Krapp and Dobbie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beowulf</td>
<td>Klaeber’s “Beowulf,” ed. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brut</td>
<td>Lazamon: Brut, ed. Brook and Leslie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>The Canterbury Tales, in Benson, ed., The Riverside Chaucer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EETS</td>
<td>Early English Text Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gawain</td>
<td>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Tolkien, Gordon, and Davis</td>
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<tr>
<td>GL</td>
<td>Grammatici latini, ed. Keil</td>
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<tr>
<td>JEGP</td>
<td>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</td>
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<td>LCL</td>
<td>Loeb Classical Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>ME</td>
<td>Middle English</td>
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<tr>
<td>N&amp;Q</td>
<td>Notes and Queries</td>
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<td>OE</td>
<td>Old English</td>
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<td>OF</td>
<td>Old French</td>
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<td>ON</td>
<td>Old Norse</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPl.Bx</td>
<td>Piers Plowman: The B-Version Archetype (Bx), ed. Burrow and Turville-Petre</td>
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## List of Abbreviations

- **PPl.Creed**: *Pierce the Ploughmans Crede*, ed. Skeat
- **SEENET**: Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts
- **STS**: Scottish Text Society
- **YLS**: *Yearbook of Langland Studies*