

Cornelius, Ian. *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781107154100

book abstract

Alliterative poetry is first recorded in English from the late seventh century, which makes it the oldest poetry in this language. Surviving poems include *Cædmon's Hymn*, *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Piers Plowman*, several of the most important works of medieval English literature. This is also a defunct poetry: it died out soon after the close of the period we call "medieval", and it remains deeply enigmatic. 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 have easy answers.

-----

This book is about the past and future of the verse form employed in *Piers Plowman*, and some of the formal features that set Langland's verse apart from other poems in this meter. *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter* holds that the startling rhythmical variations of alliterative poetry come into sharper focus when viewed in diachronic perspective: the meter was always in transition; to understand it, we must reconstruct the stages of its development and recognize where it was headed at the moment it died out.

Chapter one asks what a medieval treatise on English alliterative verse might have told us, had one been written and survived. I examine the thirteenth-century Icelandic treatises on Old Norse poetry, the remarks of Gerald of Wales on English and Welsh poetry, and the teachings of the classical and medieval disciplines of grammar and rhetoric. The verse practice of alliterative poets exceeded the conceptual resources of medieval literary theory: a medieval treatise on the English poetry would have left our questions unanswered.

Chapter two argues that the main lines of modern research on this topic have underestimated the peculiarity of alliterative verse. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, study of Old English poetry has been guided by the notion that it was "accentual," "strong-stress," or "stress-based." In recent decades, however, scholars have become increasingly conscious of incongruities. Challenges to the "accentual paradigm" have been articulated by Thomas Cable, R. D. Fulk, and, most fully, by Nicolay Yakovlev. This chapter inquires how modern scholars first came to read Old English poetry as accentual, and why that research paradigm may come to be replaced.

Chapter three extends this reassessment forward into the Middle English period. From the time that modern scholars first recognized Old English poetry as poetry, they also noticed its resemblance to the alliterative poetry of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Both have alliteration; both lack end-rhyme; they share some distinctive vocabulary. These resemblances have been assigned several different interpretations. The balance of evidence is that the surviving alliterative poems in Old and Middle English are the remnants of a continuous practice of verse composition in a continuously evolving verse form. Lawman's *Brut* plays a key role in this narrative. The paths of metrical change remain speculative, but the fourteenth-century "alliterative revival" should be seen as rising out of a much longer history of verse composition, with tails of lower productivity before and after.

Chapter four examines the structure and diversity of the fourteenth-century meter in more detail. Standard literary histories divide Middle English alliterative verse into poems of "high style" and

poems of “plain style,” or into a “formal corpus” and an “informal corpus.” Research on alliterative meter has focused on the formal corpus, a group of about a dozen poems exhibiting considerable uniformity in language and meter. The informal corpus is a more miscellaneous category, yet it contains at least one robust sub-group, consisting of *Piers Plowman* and epigones. I describe the meter of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which I take as representative of the formal corpus; I also explore the deviant metrical styles of two poems in the informal corpus, *Piers Plowman B* and *Piers the Plowman’s Creed*. Comparison shows what is distinctive about each poem and shines a light on metrical diversity, which remains an underexplored topic in the scholarship. In his line-work, as in other aspects of his poem, Langland was singularly adventurous.

Chapter five pursues the historical consequences of stylistic diversification, and asks how and why alliterative verse died out. From the fourteenth century to the sixteenth, English poets repeatedly took alliterative verse as a model for something different. In certain poems, one can perceive the emergence of a new meter, shorn of complexity and reconstructed according to an anapestic template, almost always in combination with rhyme. The Harley lyrics “Man in the Moon” and “Song of a Husbandman” exhibit rhythmical preferences shared by poems in the court of James VI of Scotland, and they show how the alliterative meter eventually collapsed. Reduced to an anapestic swing, alliterative verse was absorbed into the family of accentual-syllabic forms.

An epilogue looks back at the meter of *Piers Plowman* from the standpoint of Edmund Spenser. In the 1570s, when Spenser set about inventing an antique look for new English poetry, alliterative verse had long since ceased to be a vital component of the literary culture over most of the realm. Middle English alliterative verse could still be read, but its metrical form had no chance of being understood. In the *Shepherd’s Calendar* Spenser wrote lines that recall the old alliterative line, but he also drew upon classical rhetoric to explain why this form belonged in the past.