Alliterative Metre and Medieval English Literary History. A Critical Review of

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Ian Cornelius. 2017. *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. x + 223 pp. ISBN: 978-1-1071-5410-0.

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The years 2016 and 2017 have respectively witnessed the publication of two stimulating Cambridge University Press monographs on medieval English literary history: Eric Weiskott's *English Alliterative Verse: Poetic Tradition and Literary History* (2016) and Ian Cornelius's *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter* (2017). There is much that these two books have in common. They are both fashionably written, both have much to say about metre and, most importantly, they both take as their fundamental premise the notion of an uninterrupted tradition of alliterative poetry from the Old to the late Middle English period that excludes Ælfric of Eynsham's rhythmical-alliterative prose. In this regard, they run counter to the established opinion among literary historians, most of whom still adhere to the views set out by Norman Blake. In an influential essay published in 1969, Blake contended that fourteenth-century alliterative verse evolved not out of classical Old English poetry (which he believed to have died out soon after the Conquest), but out of the loose style of versification of early Middle English poets, the origin of which Blake in turn attributed to Ælfric's characteristic style. As several scholars have contended,[1] however, there are compelling lexical and metrical arguments both for a continuous tradition between Old and late Middle English alliterative verse, and for the exclusion of Ælfric's rhythmical prose from this tradition.[2] Scholars who find Blake's argument unconvincing, such as the present reviewer, will therefore welcome the opposition to that view presented by Weiskott and Cornelius.

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[1] See, for example, Duncan (1992), Fulk (2004) and Russom (2004).

[2] On the categorisation of Ælfric's rhythmical style as prose rather than verse, see Pascual (2014).

Medieval English literary history is a field that interests many scholars, and yet there are few who are ready to undertake the arduous study of alliterative metre, which is so necessary for the successful practice of that discipline. Weiskott and Cornelius are to be praised for taking the bull by the horns and putting alliterative metre at the core of their literary-historical endeavours. Thus, the central argument that they both deploy in support of a continuous alliterative tradition is of a metrical nature. In particular, they argue that the metre of early Middle English poems of the thirteenth century—paradigmatically represented by Laȝamon's *Brut*—constitutes the intermediate evolutionary stage between classical Old English and fourteenth-century alliterative versification. Despite its chronological plausibility, this theory, which they have drawn from Nicolay Yakovlev's Oxford DPhil thesis (2008), is very problematic, mainly because of the strict metre and consistent alliteration of Old and late Middle English poetry, on the one hand, and the loose rhythms and irregular alliteration of works of early Middle English verse, on the other. There must certainly be a connection between classical Old English and fourteenth-century alliterative verse, but the idiosyncratic metrical style of Laȝamon's *Brut* and related works can hardly be the intermediate link between the two. Thus, laudable as their strong focus on metre is, Weiskott and Cornelius's commitment to Yakovlev's theory is, unfortunately, the source of major weaknesses in their argumentation. Before assessing these weaknesses in detail, however, it is worth providing a summary of what is unique to each of the two books under review.

Weiskott's book consists of an introduction and six chapters, amounting to 173 pages, plus a conclusion, three appendices, a useful glossary of technical terms, endnotes, bibliography and analytical index. Throughout the six chapters of his monograph, Weiskott alternates metrical analysis with the study of poetic style. His main claim about style is that poetry of the three periods concerned is characterised by adopting the same attitude towards the distant past (4). Taking *Beowulf* (chapter one), Laȝamon's *Brut* (chapter three) and *St. Erkenwald* (chapter five) as cases in point, Weiskott reaches the conclusion that what characterises alliterative verse of the three periods at a thematic level is the poets' deep interest for events far removed from the time when they were composing. This distinctive feature of alliterative verse, he contends, is substantiated by poetic prologues, which he regards as "exceptionally dense expressions of style" (4). He devises a typology of prologues to Old and Middle English poems (chapters two and four, respectively), identifying four main types for Old English verse (53) and another four for Middle English (108). Of these, the Old English "days-of-yore" and the Middle English "olde-tyme" prologues are especially pertinent to his argument. Since the chief concern of these two prologues is with the distant past, their presence in a significant number of Old and Middle English alliterative poems is taken to indicate not only that there is a continuous tradition of alliterative verse but also that fondness for the faraway past is its essential thematic feature (53, 117-118).

Weiskott's typology of prologues is a valuable contribution to the study of medieval English literature that furnishes a number of illuminating insights into the history of

alliterative verse. Late Middle English "olde-tyme" prologues to alliterative poems, for example, systematically use the word *sythen* ["since"], which is absent from the same type of prologue in non-alliterative works. The Old English ancestor of *sythen*, *siððan*, is regularly used in Old English verse, and so Weiskott, I think correctly, takes this regularity as an indication of the Old English origin of late Middle English alliterative poetry (117). It does not follow, however, that interest in events distant in time is the most distinctive thematic feature of the alliterative tradition. As Weiskott admits, the "olde-tyme" prologue, which he regards as the clearest indication of a poet's fondness for the faraway past, is more frequent in non-alliterative than in alliterative verse. He accounts for this difficulty as an instance of the influence of the alliterative tradition on non-alliterative poetry (117-118), but this explanation does not seem to be satisfactory. After all, Old English alliterative poems as prominent as *Guthlac A*, *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon* were composed not long after the events that they recount took place. It therefore seems to the present reviewer that Weiskott's characterisation of alliterative verse as essentially concerned with the distant past is motivated more by his desire to include Laȝamon, a historian, in the alliterative tradition than by a genuine willingness to capture a thematic reality of alliterative poetry. In fact, it would seem that the vast majority of oral-derived poetry in any language is primarily concerned with the distant past. Accordingly, interest in the distant past does not seem a particularly strong criterion for inclusion in the alliterative tradition.

Cornelius's monograph comprises an introduction and five chapters, which amount to 146 pages, plus an epilogue, endnotes, bibliography and analytical index. The author has accompanied the study of Old and Middle English metre with a chronological account of scholarship on English alliterative versification. He begins with a discussion of contemporary medieval references to alliterative metre, with particular emphasis on Gerald of Wales's twelfth-century comments on English poetry and Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century *Háttatal*, a description of Old Norse metrical forms (chapter one). He concludes that modern linguistics and philology furnish better frameworks for the analysis of alliterative metre than these medieval works. He then proceeds to discuss modern scholarly approaches (chapter two), with a special focus on the foundational work of Eduard Sievers, which has dominated the field since its appearance in the late nineteenth century (1885; 1893). Cornelius praises Sievers for the explanatory power that his theory brought to the study of alliterative versification, but he simultaneously criticises Sieversian metrics and its practitioners for overemphasising the role of prosodic stress in Old English metre. He urges that Sievers's outdated paradigm should be abandoned in favour of Yakovlev's new theory, according to which it is the morphological class of a given word, and not its degree of stress, that determines its metrical behaviour.

One corollary of Yakovlev's hypothesis is that differences in levels of stress—which have traditionally been accorded metrical significance—are irrelevant to Old English versification. A detailed critique of Yakovlev's theory would exceed the limits of this review, but readers of Cornelius's book should be alerted to the salient improbability of

Yakovlev's analysis. It has long been recognised that resolvable words evince different metrical behaviours depending on whether they receive primary or secondary stress. Words like *sele* ["hall"] and *draca* ["dragon"] always undergo resolution,[3] thereby occupying a single metrical position, if they receive primary stress, as in *Beowulf* 81b, *sele hlīfade* ["the hall towered"] (81b) and *draca morðre swealt* ["the dragon died from the assault"] (892b).[4] Under secondary stress, however, they can occupy either one or two positions depending on the etymological length of their inflectional endings.[5] Thus, in a verse like 715a, *goldsele gumena* ["golden hall of men"], *sele* undergoes resolution and hence fills a single position because its ending *-e* is etymologically short (*sele*, an *i*-stem, descends from prehistoric Old English *sæli, with a short thematic *-i*).[6] In a verse like 2273a, *nacod nīðdraca* ["bare, violent dragon"], on the other hand, *draca* occupies two positions because of its *-a* ending, which was long in prehistoric Old English (*draca* derives from *drakō).[7] Thus, contrary to Yakovlev's analysis, the degree of stress on certain words must play a fundamental role in regulating their metrical behaviour.

The systematic correspondence between resolution and etymological length under secondary stress, commonly referred to as Kaluza's law, confirms beyond reasonable doubt that Sievers's theory is not the outdated paradigm that Cornelius claims it to be. Sievers posited the occasional suspension of resolution under secondary stress only to preserve the integrity of what he considered to be the most basic rule of Old English poetic composition, the so-called four-position principle—according to which, a verse is metrical if it contains no more and no less than four positions. The verse *goldsele gumena* would consist of five positions if *sele* did not undergo resolution, and, complementarily, *nacod nīðdraca* would consist of only three if resolution of *draca* were not suspended.[8] Thus, etymological length was absent from Sievers's original formulation. It was only a few years after the publication of Sievers's work that Max Kaluza (1896) observed that whenever resolution must be invoked to preserve Sievers's scansion, a short ending is involved; and that whenever suspension of resolution is required, long endings

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[3]   Resolution is a process of syllabic equivalence whereby a short stressed syllable and its unstressed successor count metrically as a single long stressed syllable—that is, disyllables like *sĕle* and *drăca* can be metrically equivalent to monosyllables like *sæl* and *dēor*. For dependable accounts of resolution, see Bliss (1962, 9) and Terasawa (2011, 30-31). Resolution can be understood as a way to render the rhythm of Old English verses less monotonous by breaking a monosyllabic lift into a disyllabic sequence: See the metrical section of J.R.R. Tolkien's prefatory remarks to C.L. Wrenn's revision of John R. Clark Hall's prose translation of *Beowulf* (1950, xxviii-xliii).

[4]   All quotations from *Beowulf* are from the edition by R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (2008). These two verses scan / / \ x and / / x \, that is, types D1 and D4 respectively.

[5]   For the etymological length of Old English inflectional endings, see Fulk (1992, 419-425; 2018, 79-87).

[6]   The metrical structure of *goldsĕle gŭmena* is / \ / x, a type A2a with its half-lift realised by the resolved disyllabic sequence *sele*. The sequence *gŭme-* also occupies a single lift because of resolution.

[7]   The verse *năcod nīðdrăca* scans / / \ x, a type D1 with the half-lift occupied by the unresolved short syllable *-dră-*. Note that the disyllable *năcod* is resolved and hence occupies a single position. For a full list of verses featuring either resolution or its suspension under secondary stress in *Beowulf*, see Bliss (1967, 27-30).

[8]   That is, the metrical configurations of *goldsĕle gŭmena* and *năcod nīðdrăca* would respectively be / \ / x and / / \ (both of them unmetrical) if resolution under secondary stress were not applied to the former instance and if it were not suspended in the latter.

are implicated in the process.[9] This can only mean, as R.D. Fulk first argued in *A History of Old English Meter* (1992, 26-27, 55-56, 60), that Sievers's assumptions about metrical variability under secondary stress must be correct, since they allowed Kaluza to detect an independent regularity that was not part of Sievers's original system.[10] It is regrettable that such a crucial insight into Old English metrical theory has simply been left out of consideration in Cornelius's discussion of the history of the discipline. Readers of his book should therefore take his account with a pinch of salt and be aware that new theories like Yakovlev's, which rejects Sievers's basic premise that stress levels possess metrical significance, cannot be correct. Sieversian scansion is demonstrably accurate, and so it remains the one valid paradigm for the study of Old English metre.[11]

The two books under review contain much that will command the attention of scholars specialising in the history of English alliterative metre. Weiskott, for example, adduces compelling metrical, syntactical and codicological evidence in support of the notion that fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century alliterating stanzaic poems like the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, which have been frequently considered to belong to the alliterative tradition, are not in reality part of that tradition (2016, 103-106). Cornelius carries out a detailed comparative analysis of the metrical styles of the formal and informal corpora of Middle English alliterative verse, taking *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as representative of the former corpus, and *Piers Plowman* B and *Piers the Plowman's Creed* as representative of the latter (2017, 104-129). He also accounts for the collapse of the alliterative tradition by arguing that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries audiences of alliterative poetry gradually reinterpreted it as featuring an anapaestic rhythmical structure (130-154). Most importantly, both books expound and elaborate on Yakovlev's theory of metrical evolution. As pointed out above, the kernel of this theory is that the metre of Laȝamon's *Brut* represents the intermediate stage between Old English metre and fourteenth-century alliterative versification. Of all the arguments advanced in these two books, this is the one that has the major implications for medieval English literary history. Accordingly, the remainder of this review will be concerned with assessing its reliability.

Both Old and late Middle English poetry evince the same regular pattern of alliteration across the line (Duggan 1986), and both of them strictly regulate unstressed syllables within the half-line (Cable 1988; Duggan 1988). Moreover, late Middle English verse possesses a rich inventory of poeticisms that are genetically derived from the poetic lexicon of Old English (Tolkien and Gordon 1967, 139). Early Middle English verse works, on the other hand, rely on alliteration only sporadically and do not regulate unstressed syllables in any conspicuous way—see, for example, Glowka (1984). Nor do they possess the large number of Old English-derived poetic words that can

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be found in fourteenth-century alliterative poetry (Fulk 2012, 132). For these reasons, some scholars hold the plausible theory that classical Old English verse evolved into late Middle English through an intermediate stage of oral composition that has left no written record behind—see, for example, Fulk (2004), Russom (2004) and Duncan (1992). From this point of view, the idiosyncratic prosody of the early Middle English works that have survived in writing is not representative of that lost mode of oral composition. Laȝamon and his contemporaries are best understood as literate innovators working outside the oral tradition of classical alliterative verse and relying on some of its most characteristic features, like alliteration, only occasionally (Pascual 2017b).

Weiskott and Cornelius both believe that early Middle English poetry has struck some scholars as idiosyncratic and non-traditional only because they have looked at it from the wrong perspective. Contrary to what past generations of metrists have maintained, they argue, building on Yakovlev's theory, that alliteration is not a structural feature of English alliterative versification. The inconsistent use of alliteration in the *Brut* and related works thus ceases to be an obstacle to the argument for their affiliation to the alliterative tradition. As Weiskott boldly claims, "[t]hroughout this study, I treat alliterative meter without reference to alliteration, which I regard as an ornament, not a metrical entity" (2016, 5). Although Cornelius puts it more cautiously—"I'm inclined to see alliteration as having a superficial relation to verse design" (37)—he nonetheless represents alliteration as a more or less optional marker of stress that is unrelated to metrical structure (59). This is an unwise stance for them to take, since alliteration is responsible for some metrical entities whose reality they explicitly acknowledge. One such entity is the long line, understood as a bipartite unit consisting of an on- and an off-verse. Given that Old English syntactic constituents are usually larger than poetic lines, it would have been impossible both for members of the audience and for modern editors of verse texts to ascertain the line's bipartite structure without the direction provided by its regular a(a)/ax alliterative scheme. Inasmuch as it is alliteration that gives reality to the line's bipartite configuration, it is plainly incongruous to accept the long line as a real entity of alliterative metre and simultaneously affirm that alliteration is unrelated to metrical structure.

Weiskott and Cornelius have also failed to notice that alliteration played a key role in determining the rhythmical possibilities of Old and late Middle English verses. The well-known rule of fourteenth-century alliterative poetry, according to which the second half-line must contain exactly one sequence of several unstressed syllables (or drop) immediately before or after the first lift, can be traced back to Old English practice. In classical Old English poetry, if a verse contains several unstressed syllables, these tend to accumulate in a single sequence either before the first alliterating lift of type B and C verses or immediately after the first lift of type A, in which case the second lift must alliterate (Duncan 1993). As a result, many Old English type A, B and C verses contain exactly one expanded drop immediately succeeded by an alliterating syllable. Why were expanded drops systematically placed before alliterating lifts? The simplest answer is that alliterating syllables, because of their heightened prosodic prominence, were able to

mitigate the diluting effect that several unstressed syllables would have had on the line had they not been clustered together immediately before them. Thus, the alliterative scheme of the line is to a large extent responsible for the rhythmical sequences adopted by Old English verses, and thus it is also ultimately responsible for the rhythms of late Middle English off-verses, which so clearly continue those found in Old English.

It is not difficult to see how verses with just one protracted drop became the norm in the second half of the line in late Middle English alliterative poetry. The increase in the number of function words that took place towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period must have had two direct consequences for poetic composition. First, the amount of type A, B and C verses with one expanded drop must have become significantly larger than it was in the poetry of the earlier period; and, second, it must have been impossible for traditional poets to avoid the composition of verses with new, non-classical rhythmical patterns. Because of the universal principle of closure, according to which the end of a metrical domain must be less complex than its beginning,[12] alliterative poets must have located the newer verse types in the first half-line, thereby displacing the recently increased number of canonical type A, B and C verses with one protracted drop to the second half. This means that traditional alliterative poetry of the early Middle English period must have evinced the greatest degree of asymmetry across the long line in the history of alliterative verse (Fulk 2004, 308). On the one hand, the on-verse accommodated rhythmical types that, on account of their innovative character, would not have scanned according to the rules of classical Old English poetry; while, on the other, the off-verse mainly featured rhythmical patterns with one protracted drop that, owing to the relative proximity in time to the Anglo-Saxon period, would have been almost identical to those found in classical eighth- and ninth-century Old English poetry.

Laȝamon's *Brut* and the other early Middle English verse works that survive in writing offer a very different picture. As Fulk has indicated (2004, 308), off-verses with more than one protracted drop are very frequent in other texts from the period, such as *The Grave* (16.7%), *The Soul's Address to the Body* (24%) and the *Brut* itself (16% in the first fifty complete lines of the text in MS Cotton Caligula A. IX). These figures are not very different from those for Ælfric's rhythmical prose (24%), which Weiskott and Cornelius correctly consider to be extraneous to the alliterative tradition. They try to overcome this difficulty by invoking the operation of resolution and the prefix licence—according to which, verbal prefixes and the negative particle *ne* are not counted by the metre. Their efforts are, however, unpersuasive. Some verses of the *Brut* with two expanded drops would certainly have only one if resolution is assumed to operate, but many others would lose their single protracted drop altogether, as Cornelius concedes (2017, 88-89).[13] To be sure, the prefix licence would slightly reduce

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[12] See Hayes (1983, 373). For the operation of this principle in Old English verse, see, for example, Russom (1987, 49-50).

[13] The metre of the *Brut* is so irregular that it is in fact unlikely that either Weiskott or Cornelius could have conceived of the existence of resolution in Laȝamon's work were it not for its conspicuous and corroborated presence in Old English verse.

the number of verses with more than one protracted drop, but a considerable amount of them would still remain after its operation (90). This is not an insignificant obstacle to Weiskott's and Cornelius's argument, because off-verses with more than one expanded drop were prohibited in both Old and late Middle English poetry, and they must have been particularly disapproved of in the early Middle English period, when the second half-line became the obvious repository for the most traditional rhythmical types.

Thus, Weiskott's and Cornelius's commitment to Yakovlev's theory of metrical evolution renders their chronological account of English alliterative versification unreliable. As stated above, it is the long line's alliterative scheme that seems to be ultimately responsible for the readily discernible continuity of rhythms between Old English and fourteenth-century alliterative verse. Consequently, the sporadic and irregular use of alliteration in the *Brut* and related works, along with their concomitant rhythmically extravagant off-verses, is a clear indication that they do not belong to the classical tradition of alliterative composition. Readers of Weiskott's and Cornelius's books are therefore referred to the work of Fulk (2004) and Geoffrey Russom (2004) for a dependable account of the development of English alliterative metre. To end with a positive note, it should be mentioned that Cornelius's metrical analysis of the Middle English *Physiologus* points the way to potentially promising future research (2017, 96). He argues that this mid-thirteenth-century bestiary is characterised by an unusually high degree of rhythmical asymmetry across the line—precisely the feature that ought to have characterised the metre of classical early Middle English alliterative poetry. Remarkably, in an essay published in 1992, Edwin Duncan concluded that, owing to the rhythmical and alliterative affinities of the *Physiologus* to Old and late Middle English verse, this work should be considered a remnant of the otherwise unrecorded classical alliterative poetry of the early Middle English period. Scholars in search of the missing link between Old English and fourteenth-century alliterative versification would perform a valuable service to medieval English literary history by assessing the reliability of Duncan's theory—and they would do well not to neglect the relevance of alliteration to verse structure in the process.

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