ENGLISH ALLITERATIVE VERSE

Poetic Tradition and Literary History

ERIC WEISKOTT

Contents

Introduction: The Durable Alliterative Tradition

> Grammar is coral
> a gabled light
> against the blue
> a dark museum
> Durable thing
>
> Elizabeth Willis, "Sonnet," from *Turneresque*
> (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 2003)

The chapters of this book form an essay in a type of history I call 'verse history,' a concept not covered by any of the usual terms applied to the study of literature. Verse history is the history of a tradition of composing poems in a certain meter. It is distinct from literary history, because two works from one genre, place, or time, even two works by one poet, may be in different meters. The inverse is also true, in that verse history can connect poems from very different local contexts. The relationship between Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" and a twenty-first-century sonnet on supercomputers is more general than literary influence, a genre, or a school. What any two sonnets have in common is that they belong to the same verse history, the same centuries-long sweep of metrical practice. The English sonnet tradition is a living tradition, that is, it has enjoyed a continuous formal evolution reaching to the present day. It will be the major preoccupation of this book to demonstrate that there is a particular verse history that corresponds to the notion of 'the alliterative tradition' and that this history extended continuously from *c.* 650–1550 CE. Along the way, the division of medieval English literary history into 'Old' and 'Middle' subperiods will be repeatedly challenged and renegotiated. I seek to make a medievalist contribution to the emerging field of historical poetics as it is understood by Simon Jarvis, for whom verse is "an institution, a series of practices as real as the belief in them and the capacity for them," but with the added difficulty that medieval English poets have left no *ars poetica* and indeed

Beowulf *and Verse History*

Since the poem first came to scholarly attention in the early nineteenth century, it has been conventional to regard *Beowulf* as the apotheosis of the so-called classical alliterative long line. Every theory of Old English meter has been measured by the measures of *Beowulf*. But the date of *Beowulf* and the contours of alliterative verse history before roughly 950 are interdependent reconstructions. Is *Beowulf* metrically old or metrically conservative? And how old or conservative? The meter of *Beowulf* cannot be contextualized without first inquiring into the development of alliterative meter in the unreliably documented earlier period. Metrists have sidestepped the problem either by assuming an early date for *Beowulf*, which is circular, or by subsuming verse history in language history, which is a category mistake.

This chapter reviews some metrical tests thought to establish a very early date (before *c.* 750) for the composition of *Beowulf*. The first section charts the evolution of the alliterative meter, 950–1100, and adduces new evidence of synchronic metrical variety in this misunderstood period. The second section argues that previous studies have discovered a metrically old *Beowulf* only by reducing verse history to language history a priori. The dynamism of alliterative meter, demonstrable after 950 and presumable before 950, problematizes the methods by which metrists have sought to locate *Beowulf* in the early eighth century. A third section reviews and challenges four non-metrical arguments for a very early *Beowulf*. Together, the three sections demonstrate a key conclusion of the book as a whole: metrical form has a history of its own, which cannot be reduced to cultural, linguistic, political, or textual history. To the extent that verse history registers events in these other historical series – whether the circulation of legends, the loss of inflectional vowels, the conquest of a political territory, or the transcription of an exemplar – it does so through the medium of its own logic.

Prologues to Old English Poetry

Old English poems come in two varieties, which, in the absence of native terms, may be designated 'long' and 'short.' The cutoff falls at roughly 100 lines, but the difference is generic, not mathematical.[1] Long poems are distinguished by a prologue, which takes the form of a precis, a call for attention, or a dramatization of theme. Prologues are distinct from verse prefaces, which constitute separate compositions and have their own conventions.[2] As in late medieval *accessus ad auctores*, whose forms were categorized by R. W. Hunt and then discerned in Middle English writing by Alastair Minnis, prologues to long Old English poems cluster in a few distinct groups, defined by keywords and recurrent *topoi*.[3] In addition to heading long poems, prologues are sometimes placed in the mouths of characters, reifying dramatic speech as a poetic object. More commonly, they appear in the bodies of poems without ascription to a speaking character. Such 'inset prologues,' as I will call them, may have been meant to mark the junctures between rhetorical units comparable to the *fitt* or section.

Prologues may be the closest thing to a vernacular *ars poetica* that the Anglo-Saxons have left us. As prominent stylistic gestures, prologues offer a rare opportunity to understand how Old English poets perceived poetic style and to discover affiliations between undated, unlocalized, and anonymous texts. The 'days-of-yore' prologue found in *Beowulf* and other poems is especially promising as historical evidence, because it connects Old English historical verse to Middle English (alliterative) romance (Chs. 3, 4, and 5). After surveying the types of prologue and their use in individual compositions, this chapter concludes by exploring the implications of the prologue typology for historicizing the style of *Beowulf*.

Old English Prologues and Old English Poetic Styles

Prologues to Old English poetry are chiefly of four types, which I term (in descending order of frequency) the 'we-have-heard' prologue, the

Lawman, the Last Old English Poet and the First Middle English Poet

Alliterative poetry of the late eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries rarely refers to the Norman Conquest of England (1066). Every sour note has been wrung for maximum effect in modern criticism, but the implied contrast with pre-Conquest poetry is unconvincing. *The Death of William the Conqueror* (1087–1121) is alone in criticizing the Normans, which it does in a ham-fisted way that calls to mind a few spoiled monks, not the righteous indignation of the peasantry. The sense of a way of life coming to an end in *Durham* (1104–1109) and the *First Worcester Fragment* (late twelfth century) has precedents in a variety of Old English poems. It is superfluous to add contemporary politics to the list of reasons why poets employed the *topos*. The pivotal event for post-1066 alliterative poetry was not the Conquest, but the publication of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Brittaniae* (c. 1138). To judge from the extant corpus, alliterative poets' fascination with the Arthurian past began in a Worcestershire priest's massive verse translation of the *Historia* material, extant in two copies and now known as the *Brut* (c. 1200).

Scholars have always had the impression that the *Brut* is metrically "loose" in comparison with earlier and later alliterative poetry.[1] In what follows this impression will be rejected. Careful study of alliterative meter yields a clear developmental arc connecting *Beowulf* to the *Brut* and the *Brut* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century). The new account of the evolution of alliterative verse advanced in this book challenges the view of Early Middle English poetry as the refuse of a more glorious tradition. When metrical change is seen as the predictable result of the passage of time rather than a symptom of decadence, alliterative meter can be appreciated as a dynamic institution rather than a gradually eroded edifice. This chapter clarifies recent scholarship on the meter of the *Brut* and extends it to other Early Middle English alliterative poetry. I show Lawman's meter to be highly organized, directly related to Old English and to Middle English alliterative meter, and distinct from Ælfric of Eynsham's

Prologues to Middle English Alliterative Poetry

If Old English meter evolved directly into Middle English alliterative meter, then there was no need for the resuscitation of alliterative verse at any point in its history. Conceptualized not as a new beginning in literary history but as one phase in a durable poetic tradition, the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century alliterative corpus sheds new light on the chronological distribution of the manuscript record, the diversification of medieval English poetic forms, and the shifting relationships between Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and French.

This chapter argues that the lack of firm documentary evidence for the composition of alliterative poetry between the Middle English *Physiologus* (c. 1250) and *William of Palerne* (1336–61) is an accident of manuscript survival, not evidence of the death of alliterative verse and a subsequent 'Alliterative Revival.' Because the hypothesis of an Alliterative Revival remains the consensus among Middle English specialists, the first section presents metrical, lexical, and textual evidence for the continuity of the alliterative tradition across the ninety-year gap in the written record. The second section offers metrical, syntactical, and codicological evidence against the conflation of the (unrhymed) alliterative meter with alliterating stanzaic meters. The third section develops a typology of prologues to long Middle English alliterative poems, with reference to similar prologues to non-alliterative Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and French poems and with special emphasis on *Piers Plowman* (c. 1370–90). The typology has a twofold purpose: first, to measure prologues to Middle English alliterative poetry against the prologues to earlier alliterative poems, discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, and so to extrapolate a stylistic *longue durée* for alliterative verse; second, to measure alliterative poetry against non-alliterative poetry (especially romance), and so to gauge the position of alliterative verse in late medieval English literary culture.

The Erkenwald *Poet's Sense of History*

The central question of *St. Erkenwald* (late fourteenth/mid fifteenth centuries) is the central question of the alliterative tradition: how to uncover and understand the distant past. Consequently the narrative proceeds in two discrete stages, excavation (ll. 1–176) and interview (ll. 177–352). The plot can be summarized in one sentence, with a semicolon to represent the turning point between lines 176 and 177: in the seventh century, Erkenwald, bishop of London, discovers a tomb beneath St. Paul's Cathedral covered in indecipherable carvings and containing the undecayed body of a pagan judge, who begins to speak to the astounded onlookers; after interviewing him about his life and death, Erkenwald unintentionally baptizes the judge by reciting the baptismal formula while shedding a tear. Throughout the poem, the *Erkenwald* poet constructs a "many-storied long-ago" so detailed that it threatens to overpopulate the simple past tense.[1] With characteristic ambition, the poet extends the 'olde-tyme' prologue (see Ch. 4) far beyond a colorless reference to once-upon-a-time. The careful layering of historical frames in the first thirty-two lines of the poem is without peer in medieval English literature. For this poet, as for the *Beowulf* poet, the past is a foreign country that demands to be confronted. The tragedy of both poems is the intractability of history, the inevitability of loss in time. In *Beowulf*, there is always "æfter wiste | wop up ahafen" "lamentation taken up after feasting" (128; quoted from *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles; translation mine). In *St. Erkenwald*, "Meche mournynge and myrthe | was mellyd togeder" (350; all quotations of *St. Erkenwald* are from *St. Erkenwald*, ed. Savage).

This chapter reads *St. Erkenwald* as a serious meditation on history. The second section contrasts *St. Erkenwald* with some short English alliterative poems embedded in Latin prose and rhyming English verse, in an effort to infer the connotations of the alliterative meter in late medieval English literary culture. I argue that the *Erkenwald* poet's sense of history and use of alliterative style are more robust than the impression

The Alliterative Tradition in the Sixteenth Century

Alliterative meter after 1450 has received much less attention than its fourteenth-century ancestor.[1] As a result, basic questions about metrical phonology and metrical typology remain unanswered. Yet if the alliterative tradition exerted pressure on adjacent literary forms before 1450, as argued in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, then mapping the forms of post-1450 alliterative meter promises to sharpen understanding of post-1450 English literary culture as a whole.

This chapter traces the generic, codicological, textual, and cultural contexts for alliterative meter in the century before it disappeared from the active repertoire of verse forms. In doing so, this chapter lays the groundwork for a new literary history of the sixteenth century. After surveying the extant alliterative poems composed after 1450, I describe the systemic changes manifested in alliterative meter in this period, completing the formal evolution set out in Chapters 1, 3, and 4. The second section considers mid sixteenth- to mid seventeenth-century print and manuscript evidence for the reception of earlier alliterative meter, focusing on the two manuscript texts of *Scottish Field* (1515–47), the first of the three printings of Robert Crowley's edition of *Piers Plowman* (published in rapid succession in 1550), and Crowley's own poetry. I reconstruct scribes' and authors' perceptions of the alliterative meter in the period after the conclusion of active metrical practice but before the advent of modern metrical theory. I conclude by arguing that the contribution of the alliterative tradition to the so-called invention of modern literature has been underestimated by literary histories that enforce a division between 'medieval' and 'modern' periods of literary activity.

The Alliterative Tradition in its Tenth Century

In contrast to the relative abundance of alliterative poetry dating from the previous hundred years, only eight extant (unrhymed) alliterative poems