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THE ALLITERATIVE METER OF *PIERS PLOWMAN*

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In 1972, J. A. W. Bennett wrote that an adequate discussion of the meter of *Piers Plowman* would have to be deferred until the publication of George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson's edition of the B version.¹ It has appeared, followed by A. V. C. Schmidt's edition and several studies of fourteenth-century alliterative verse. While this essay cannot pretend to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject, perhaps it can indicate what an adequate metrical theory must take into account by looking at those offered to date. Larger considerations of the relationship of meter to style² or of Middle English alliterative verse to Old English,³ while important, will not be dealt with.

Walter W. Skeat's views on alliteration may be found in his introductory essay to volume 3 of *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*⁴ and in the volume of notes to his edition of the three versions of *Piers* for the Early English Text Society.⁵ The former is a more complete treatment, but both will be drawn on here and any substantial differences between the two noted.

In the latter essay, Skeat establishes four basic rules of Langland's meter:

- (1) Each half-line normally has two or more stressed syllables.

¹J. A. W. Bennett, *Piers Plowman: The Prologue and Passus I-VII of the B Text* (Oxford, 1972), p. 228.

²See John Lawlor, *Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism* (London, 1962), pp. 189-239; Elizabeth Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 13-24; Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 59-60.

³See James Eby, *The Alliterative Meter of Piers Plowman A* (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1971).

⁴Walter W. Skeat, "An Essay on Alliterative Poetry," in *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*, ed. J. W. Hales and F. J. Furnivall, 3 vols. (London, 1868), 3:xi-xxxix.

⁵Walter W. Skeat, *Piers Plowman*, IV, *General Preface, Notes, and Indexes*, Early English Text Society (EETS), O.S. 81 (London, 1885), p. xlviili-li.

More than two are more often found in the first than in the second half-line.

- (2) The initial letters common to two or more of these stressed syllables are rime-letters. The first half-line should have two, the second one. Those in the first half-line are called sub-letters, that in the second the chief-letter.
- (3) The chief-letter should begin the first strong syllable in the second half-line.
- (4) Vowels rime with vowels; only the first letter of consonant clusters, e.g. *sp-* or *str-*, need be the same.⁶

An example of this most common type (aa/ax) is:

I *shópe* me in *shróudēs* ` as I a *shépe* wéré. (B Pr 2)

A variant to this pattern is aa/aa:

In a *sómer séson* ` whan soft was the sonne. (B Pr 1)

This he originally considered "by no means good,"⁷ as the final alliteration on "sonne" takes emphasis away from the chief-letter in "soft." However, in the later essay he calls the alliteration on "sonne" merely "superfluous and accidental."⁸

Other variants are aa/xa:

Vn*kýnde* to her *kýn* ` and to *állē cristene* (B I 190)

and xa/aa:

Týle he had *sýluer* ` for his *sáwes* and his *sélynge*. (A II 112)

Another permissible variant has no alliteration at all:

Whi that *véniaunce féł* ` on *Sául* and his children. (A III 245)

(He did not accept the alliteration of *v* with *f*, saying it would be "very imperfect" rime.)⁹ However, if several lines without alliteration occur together, he suspects scribal corruption.

⁶ EETS, p. xlix. I have retained Skeat's terminology, "rime" and "rime-letter," even though "alliteration" and "alliterating-letter" could be substituted. J. A. W. Bennett uses both in the appendix on meter in his edition of the B text.

⁷ "An Essay," p. xx.

⁸ EETS, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. lii.

According to Skeat's earlier essay, each half-line can, and in practice usually does, have anacrusis of up to three weak syllables before the first strong syllable. This "catch" is necessary for the sense, but superfluous to the meter.¹⁰ Examples are:

Bote in a) *Máyes mórwnynge* · on) *Máluerne húlles*
 Me bi-)fél a férlý · a) féyrie me thóuhte. (A Pr 5-6)

He does not mention this "catch" in the later essay, but there is no indication that he had abandoned the concept. In neither essay does he approve of weakly stressed syllables bearing the alliteration, as it tends to be lost:

Thanne I fráinēd hir fairē · for hým that hir mádē (B I 58)
 And with hím to wónye with wó · whil gód is in héuene.
 (B II 106)

He disapproves even more strongly of aa/xx and aaa/xx, where the chief-letter is omitted:

I wol) wórschupe ther-wíth · Tréuthe in my lýue (A VII 94)
 And) béere heor brás on thi bác · to) Cáleys to súlle.
 (A III 189)

Certain stock tags, such as "he said," "quoth he," "and said," sometimes lie completely outside the meter of the line. Skeat assumes that the reader said them in a lowered tone before resuming his recitation:

And seide,—“Hedde I) lóue of the kýng · lúite wolde I récche
 (A IV 51)
 “I) wás not wónt to wórche,” —quod a wastour— “;it) wól I
 not biginne!” (A VII 153)

He concludes in the later essay that “Langland was not very particular about his metre. He frequently neglects to observe the strict rules, and evidently considered metre of much less importance than the sense.”¹¹ Skeat appends a series of tables compiled by F. Rosenthal which list those lines in three versions which do not conform to the aa/ax type.

J. P. Oakden discriminates four categories of line types:¹²

¹⁰ “An Essay,” p. xiv.

¹¹ EETS, p. li.

¹² J. P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English* (Manchester, 1930), p. 167.

- (1) Types used in Old English: aa/ax, ax/ax, xa/ax, ab/ab, and ab/ba.
- (2) Types used in late Old English: aa/xa, xa/aa, aa/aa, ax/aa, aa/bb, ax/xa, and xa/xa.
- (3) Types with excessive alliteration: aaa/a(a) and aab/ab.
- (4) Types which are failures: aa/xx, xx/aa, aaa/xx, and lines without alliteration.

These fail because "the two half-lines are not bound together," though the same can be said about aa/bb, which he places in category 2.¹³ *Piers Plowman* is among those poems which show "distinct signs of carelessness as well as diversity."¹⁴ Placing alliteration on what would otherwise be a weakly stressed syllable—a common practice in *Piers*—is a violation of the stress.¹⁵ According to his figures, 5.3% of the lines in the A version, 4.1% of B, and 3% of C are failures (category 4), but he says nothing as to the possibility of scribal corruption.¹⁶

However, one wishes that Oakden had provided tables showing how he scans each line, like Rosenthal's in Skeat's essay and Sapura's (below), because it is hard to determine his principles of scansion from his single examples. For instance, he says that in lines with "excessive alliteration" it is often difficult to tell if all the alliterating letters fall on strong syllables. His example for aaa/ax is

Wende I wydene in this world ' wondres to here,

(A Pr 4; Skeat)

which Skeat scanned aa/ax, considering the alliteration on "wende" superfluous because it is unaccented.¹⁷ Since Oakden places nearly 10% of the lines of each version of *Piers* in this "excessive" category, his figures would probably be altered considerably if Skeat's scansion were used.

George Kane, in his edition of the A version, does not define metrical alliteration in the poem. However, he does say that scribal variants affecting the meter usually increase the alliteration. "Most often these variants increase the number of staves [alliterating words] in the line. Sometimes, however, they introduce secondary alliteration, or replace the classical form of two staves in the first and one in the second half-line with an *aa bb* alliteration; or

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186-187.

¹⁷ EETS, p. 1.

with cross-alliteration, which was perhaps regarded as especially elegant."¹⁸ He follows this with a long list of such variants from the Lincoln's Inn MS and concludes: "This tendency to embellish the form by increasing alliteration, exhibited so strikingly by L, appears, to a lesser extent but markedly, in the other manuscripts."¹⁹ Meter affected his editorial decisions as follows: "In a number of cases metrical considerations supported one variant against another. . . . Where manuscript evidence permitted and no other consideration forbade it, the metrical variant was adopted. . . . I refrain, however, from emendation on metrical grounds where all support is lacking."²⁰

In the introduction to his edition of the first seven *passus* of the B version, J. A. W. Bennett says: "I have rarely emended on metrical (or alliterative) grounds alone, since it is impossible to be sure what variation the poet (as distinct from the copyists) allowed himself within an accepted alliterative pattern."²¹ He provides a short appendix on meter, which summarizes Skeat's later remarks and concludes with the anticipation of Kane and Donaldson's edition noted above.²²

In their edition of the B version, George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson use metrical tests as one of their chief editing tools. They found all previous studies of the Middle English alliterative long line unacceptable, primarily because the earlier studies had not taken into account the possibility of textual corruption, and so resorted to their own analysis. "Its results have been of crucial importance in determining originality and we must therefore discuss them here."²³

As we saw in Skeat, alliteration should fall on strongly stressed syllables; when it is allowed to fall on weakly stressed syllables it tends to be lost. Oakden says that alliteration on an otherwise weakly stressed syllable violated the normal stress pattern. Kane and Donaldson avoid this dilemma by assuming that normal stress in Middle English was radically different from that of Modern English, and so "little" words (prepositions, adverbs, auxiliary verbs, etc.), which are now weakly stressed, could have been strongly stressed then. They admit that there is no evidence to prove this, but since there is none to disprove it, they think it "judicious to allow Langland the benefit of the

¹⁸ George Kane, *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (London, 1960), p. 141.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

²¹ Bennett, p. viii.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

²³ George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London, 1975), p. 131.

doubt, since we have virtually no information about Middle English sentence intonation."²⁴

They consider three alliterating words per line the norm, four or five superfluous, and two, evidence of corruption in the text. They refer to Kane's introduction to the A version for examples of scribal activity which deprive lines of alliteration, but fail to mention that Kane had also said: "Most often these [scribal] variants increase the number of staves in the line."²⁵

At any rate, Kane and Donaldson consider the patterns aa/xy, ax/ay, xa/ay, aa/bb, and ab/ab non-authorial unless the line contains some Latin.²⁶ They are less sure about xa/aa and ax/aa, but would like to call them scribal also. Aa/xa is scribal if the final alliteration occurs in the last or second to last syllable in a line.

Robert Sapora, in *A Theory of Middle English Alliterative Meter*, has attempted to isolate the generative rules for alliterative verse. Fundamental to his analysis is the coincidence of heavy stress and alliteration. His study is based on an analysis of seven poems: all of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Purity*, *St. Erkenwald*, and *Patience*, and a thousand lines each of *Morte Arthure*, *The Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*, and the A version of *Piers Plowman* edited by George Kane. In analyzing *Piers*, he found a much higher occurrence of aa/xx and aaa/xx (4.7% and 1.4% respectively) than in any of the other poems. "This is the only instance in the seven poems where particular line types with an unconventional realization of RV [ax] in the second half-line have been used so much more frequently than the theory predicts."²⁷ He goes on to say that this difference in Langland's meter "has important implications for a reader's strategy."²⁸

According to Sapora, 11.6% of the A version's lines are types ax/ax, xa/ax, aa/xx, aa/xa, xa/aa, or ax/xa, i.e. non-metrical, hence non-authorial, according to Kane and Donaldson's criteria for the B version. Fortunately, he provides an appendix which shows how he scans each line. An examination of his data reveals that about two-thirds of the lines which he places in the above categories could be put in categories acceptable to Kane and Donaldson by stressing the "little" words. Thus,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136, esp. n. 25. Kane, *The A Version*, p. 141.

²⁶ Kane and Donaldson, *The B Version*, p. 137, n. 31.

²⁷ Robert Sapora, *A Theory of Middle English Alliterative Meter* (The Mediaeval Academy of America [Cambridge, Mass.], 1977), pp. 62 and 76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[Wonne] þat þise wastours wiþ glotonye destroiȝ eþ.
(A Pr 22; Kane)

Sapora scans aa/xx, considering the alliteration in the second half-line on "wiþ" coincidental, since he, like Skeat, does not stress prepositions, whereas Kane and Donaldson would stress "wiþ" and produce a standard aa/ax line. In this one case, the line as it appears in the other modern edition of the A version, Knott and Fowler,²⁹ cannot be made to conform to Kane and Donaldson's metrical rules:

That many of these wastores with glotonye destroyeth.
(A Pr 22; K & F)

However, this is an exception; a spot check reveals that Sapora's statistics would have been very little different if he had used the Knott and Fowler edition. Therefore, there remain in the first 1007 lines of Kane's A version some thirty-nine lines which are non-metrical and, according to Kane and Donaldson's theory, non-authorial. If one objects to applying their metrical rules, which were derived from the B version, to A, the precedent is theirs: their editorial technique is to treat all three versions as one poem, appealing repeatedly to the A and C versions for authority to emend B.³⁰

A. V. C. Schmidt, in the appendix on meter in his edition of the B version,³¹ lists the different metrical patterns in *Piers*: aa/ax, aa/aa, aaa/ax, aaa/xy, aaa/bb, and ax/ax. Accepting ax/ax as authorial is apparently the only exception he takes to Kane and Donaldson's theory.

How can the reader choose among these conflicting descriptions of a poem's meter? The best metrical theory should produce the most effective oral presentation of a poem, in which the meter reinforces the sense and does not run counter to it. After all, it is safe to say that *Piers* was read aloud more commonly in the fourteenth century than it is now. What are the results of such a test?

Skeat's system, which does not stress any syllables in the "catch" even if they carry the alliteration, and leaves, where necessary, stock tags like "he said" completely outside the rhythm of the line, produces a very effective

²⁹Thomas Knott and David Fowler, *Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the A-Version*, (Baltimore, 1952), p. 67.

³⁰For a painstaking review of Kane and Donaldson's emendations and tables of their numerous adoptions from the A and C versions, see David Fowler in *Yearbook of English Studies*, 7 (1977): 23-42.

³¹A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, (New York, 1978), pp. 359-60.

reading. To be sure, as he noted, the alliteration will sometimes be lost. Oakden does not appear to have decided clearly about stress. He calls alliteration on what would be weak syllables a violation of the stress, yet he also says that it is often difficult to tell, in lines with excessive alliteration, if all the alliterating syllables were stressed. This leaves the reader to decide for himself. Kane and Donaldson's theory produces a line like their

Haue þei worship in þis world þei [kepe] no better, (B I B)

where they read "kepe" on the authority of two manuscripts, arguing that the other manuscripts' "wilne" (adopted by Skeat, Bennett, and Schmidt) is a scribal "'improvement' of alliteration."³² They evidently feel that

Haue þéi worship in þís world þéi [kepe] no better

reads better than

Haue thei wórschip in this wórldé ` thei wílne no better.

(Skeat)

In isolation one reading may appear as good as the other, but if the whole poem is read this way, constantly stressing the articles, prepositions, and other little words, it does not make much sense. Even after producing such distorted readings, Kane and Donaldson's metrics still will not account for nearly 4% of the lines of the A version. Should these lines be emended also? Sapora applies Skeat's rules quite strictly; he is concerned only with naturally stressed, alliterating syllables. From what one is able to see of Schmidt's views, he agrees in the main with Kane and Donaldson.

There appear to be two schools, one best represented by Skeat, the other by Kane and Donaldson. Kane and Donaldson's arguments are quite plausible until they are taken out of the editorial laboratory and applied to the real situation of reading the poem, whether in the fourteenth century or the twentieth. Their method does not produce a meaningful poem now, and it is difficult to see how it would have 600 years ago. For whatever reasons their metrics were adopted, they do not seem to be a tenable description of the meter as found in *Piers Plowman*.

³² Kane and Donaldson, *The B Version*, p. 155.

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