Before Prosody: Early English Poetics in Practice and Theory

The past of poetics is changing rapidly these days. Yopie Prins, Meredith Martin, and other scholars of Victorian poetry have called for a ‘historical poetics’ that would reevaluate the received narrative of English literary history by recovering alternate ways of theorizing and experiencing poetic form (Hall 2011; Martin 2012; Prins 2008). Martin’s 2012 book, *The Rise and Fall of Meter*, described by one reviewer as “field-defining” (Glaser 2013: 328), trawls now-obscure poetics manuals and the annals of prosodic infighting in order to challenge the inevitability of modern scansional techniques. Through a combination of archival research and cultural analysis, Martin implicates the concept of meter in British war (the “military-metrical complex,” 130) and nation-building, from Empire Day to the National Service League to the *New English Dictionary*. The unlikely protagonists of Martin’s new literary history are the prosodist George Saintsbury and the poet-prosodists Robert Bridges, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Coventry Patmore. Martin argues that meter mattered in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England, and in ways that were strategically obscured (and then simply forgotten) by later polemicists and practitioners.

In addition to meter, this emergent research program reconsiders two other literary topics of enduring critical interest. On one side, historical poetics shades off into the histories of poetic genres, especially lyric, as in the essays gathered in the January 2008 issue of *PMLA* under the heading “The New Lyric Studies” (cp. Jackson 2014). On the other side, historical poetics shades off into the histories of poetry *per se*, with focus on the twentieth-century amalgamation of diverse literary forms and practices into an idea of Poetry with a capital ‘P.’ These two projects of historical recovery converge in Virginia Jackson’s deeply polemical study, *Dickinson’s Misery* (2005). By coordinating material and cultural analysis with a critique of editorial and critical history, Jackson seeks to relocate the lyricism of Emily Dickinson’s verse from practices of poetic composition to
practices of poetic reading. In Jackson’s account, the New Critical flattening of poetry into Poetry and the explosion of the genre of the lyric are best comprehended as one and the same historical process: “The notion that poetry is or ever was one genre is the primary symptom of the lyricization of poetry. . . The fact that we think of almost all poetry as lyric is the secondary symptom of lyricization” (Jackson 2008: 103). Jackson proposes to break into a new way of understanding the histories of English poetry, less by offering a new account of poetic form than by fixing critical attention on “the history of lyricization” (103) as a cultural process in its own right.

In different ways, Simon Jarvis and Jonathan Culler have endeavored to broaden the scope of historical poetics to include the description of poetic forms in their aesthetic richness and historical dynamism. In a pair of essays responding to the program of historical poetics mooted by Prins, Jarvis argues for “technique” as “the way in which the work of art most intimately registers historical experience” (2010: 931; cp. 2014). (In a similar methodological vein but a different literary context, Anthony Reed contends that “form . . . is where the literary text is most historical” [2014: 210].) Conceiving of poetry as “an institution, a series of practices as real as the belief in them and the capacity for them” (Jarvis 2010: 933), Jarvis questions the presumption that the representation of poetic practices mirrors the practices themselves. “The history of verse thinking is not the same as the history of representations of verse thinking” (932), he cautions. Similarly, Culler qualifies the poststructuralist critique of the category of lyric, emphasizing the distinction between histories of theory and histories of practice. In the case of the genre of lyric, Culler contends that “the weight of tradition helps make there be something to be right or wrong about” (2009: 883; cp. 2014 and 2015). Jarvis’s and Culler’s reformulations of historical poetics share the assumption that the historical development of literary practices might matter as much as, and in different ways from, the historical development of metaliterary discourses.
Disagreement about the grounds on which to reconstruct the history of verse activates long-standing tensions between extrinsic and intrinsic, historiographical and historical, or conceptual and practical approaches to literary history. Prins registers the familiar admonition that formalism become historicist when she submits that “practical application is not the point of historical poetics. There are other, more interesting questions” (2008: 233). Jarvis makes the less familiar gesture of recommending that historicism become formalist: “Historical poetics needs above all to be wary of thinking that it can exit from the painful difficulty of specifying the history of verse technique” (2014: 115). Tension between ostensibly opposite ways of stating a research problem is partially a function of the historical period under consideration. Distinctions between extrinsic and intrinsic literary histories, or between form and the representation of form, became newly contentious as the professional study of prosody picked up steam in the mid nineteenth century. Dennis Taylor argues that the Victorian period “was the first period to discover a theory of metre adequate to the genius of its poets” (1988: 3-4). It was in the late nineteenth century (though in Russia, not England) that the phrase ‘historical poetics’ was first wielded (Jarvis 2010: 932). Jarvis frames his reformulation of historical poetics in terms of the study of pre-Victorian poets, primarily Pope and Wordsworth.

Thus far, historical poetics has been most strongly associated with the study of nineteenth-century poetry. This essay takes a longer view onto the histories of English poetry from the perspective of Old English and Middle English verse. The primary purpose of this essay is to offer medieval English poetry as a case study for historical poetics, thereby bringing a different literary archive to bear on the methodological debate sketched above.

Medievalists have much to contribute to the conversation about the historical perplexities of English verse, particularly since medieval poets have left behind no *ars poetica* recording their perceptions of English meter and poetic style. Medieval English poets practiced literary form at a time when vernacular poetics had not yet become an academic subject or a sustained cultural
discourse. As such, the case of medieval English verse throws into relief the modern concepts of authority and tradition at which Culler, Jackson, Jarvis, Martin, and Prins aim their arguments. This essay takes its place beside recent scholarship that historicizes Old English and Middle English literary forms (Bahr 2013; Brantley 2013; Butterfield 2011; Cole 2013; Johnson 2013; Thornbury 2014; Trilling 2009; Tyler 2006). I seek to extend these medievalist demonstrations while discussing the broader methodological issues involved in investigating the past of poetics.

Specifically, I will emphasize the compatibility of the competing definitions of historical poetics summarized above. In recovering the cultural meaning of medieval English poetic forms, this essay takes the view that the extrinsic and intrinsic approaches to historical poetics are complementary. On the one hand, I share Martin’s skepticism that poetics and cultural studies can or should be conducted separately. Rather, poetic form and poetic practices furnish grounds for cultural work. Martin’s concept of “metrical cultures” (2012: 14) can illuminate medieval English verse with little adjustment. I also take to heart Prins’s caveat that “the sound of poetry is never heard without mediation” (2008: 229). If anything, the caveat is even more appropriate for early English poetics. Since its rediscovery by antiquarians in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, the sound of early English verse has never been heard without considerable mediation. On the other hand, I will also affirm with Jarvis that “[t]he relationship between thinking about verse and thinking in verse is not necessarily a cooperative one” (2014: 115). Jarvis is surely also right to insist that “no talk of anything’s being ‘mediated’ can be meaningful without positing that there is something to be mediated” (115). The practical/theoretical dichotomy implied by Prins’s declaration that “practical application is not the point of historical poetics” risks merely inverting the overinvestments of the New Criticism: the dividing line between form and history remains intact, but researchers have now migrated to the side of history. In my view, historical poetics should strive to understand literary
form and literary history as mutually constitutive. In this perspective, Prins’s historical poetics and Jarvis’s historical poetics coincide.

Medieval English poetry was composed, copied, and consumed not only before prosody but also before modern education, modern militarism, modern nations, modern racialism, the globalization of English, and the development of English literature as an academic discipline—all central themes in Martin’s book. Medieval English poets could not draw on a prefabricated technical terminology to conceptualize and explain the vernacular verse forms then available. For centuries, medieval English meters existed in re but not in intellectu, at the level of cultural practice but not at the level of theoretical entity. Through three case studies drawn from ongoing research on the alliterative tradition, I seek to demonstrate what is distinctive about the cultural work of early English poetics. The term ‘alliterative’ (an eighteenth-century designation, unknown to medieval poets) refers to the unrhymed, stichic meter used in Beowulf (?eighth/tenth c.), Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (late fourteenth c.), and around 300 other English poems. I focus on the alliterative tradition because subsequent developments in literary history render it paradigmatically alien from a modern perspective. The three case studies concern the continuity of alliterative meter across ten centuries of literary history, c. 650-1550 CE; Chaucer’s perceptions of alliterative romance in the late fourteenth century; and the northern thematic and dialectal coloring of post-1450 alliterative verse. In each case, I begin by summarizing formal and historical contexts for alliterative verse and end by relating the summary to the emergent field of historical poetics. The conclusion connects medieval practice and modern theory more directly by looking forward to the sixteenth century and the inauguration of sustained metadiscourses of English poetic form.

The discussion of medieval poetics in this essay is not intended to represent the consensus view among medievalists. For many aspects of the study of alliterative verse, no consensus exists. For medieval literature no less than for modern, poetics is the scene of lively critical debate. In
particular, alliterative metrics is currently experiencing a growth phase. Important discoveries have been made since 2005 but without yet displacing prior critical appraisals (overviews: Cable 2009; Cole 2010: 162-64; Weiskott 2013b). And, of course, I cannot avoid presenting the scholarly field from my own position within it. It is neither the purpose of this essay to advance a new metrical theory nor to expound the intricacies of specialist debates about alliterative verse. Rather, I summarize and cite the published arguments that seem to me the most persuasive, in service of the goal of making a medievalist contribution to a larger conversation about the theory and practice of English versification.

As its subtitle indicates, this essay traverses the dialectic between the practice and the theory of verse by moving from practice to theory. This movement is facilitated by the order of case studies: in the case of alliterative meter, no prosodic metadiscourse survives, and probably none ever existed; in the case of Chaucer’s perceptions of alliterative romance, the perceptions are sparse and largely inadequate to the poetic practice they describe; while in the case of post-1450 alliterative verse, literary history witnessed a more subtle feedback loop between perception and practice. The conceptual movement from practice to theory has come to seem less intuitive than the reverse in the light of modern “prosody wars” (Martin 2012: 2), but I argue that it better represents the elaboration of prosodic metadiscourse upon and around preexisting poetic practices in early English literary culture.

Alliterative Meter, 650-1550: Practice before Theory

The term ‘alliterative meter’ denotes the unrhymed meter used in Old English poetry, as in Beowulf; in Early Middle English alliterative poetry, often adorned with medial rhyme but not with end rhyme, as in Lawman’s Brut (c. 1200); and in Middle English alliterative poetry, as in Sir Gawain
and the Green Knight and Piers Plowman (c. 1370-90). Because the study of Old English poetry and the study of Middle English alliterative poetry have usually been conducted separately, and because no extant alliterative poem is datable to the period c. 1250-1340, some scholars have expressed doubts about the continuity of the alliterative tradition from Old to Middle English (Blake 1979; Hanna 1999; Salter 1988: 170-79; Turville-Petre 1977). Skepticism about continuity arose in response to early twentieth-century scholars whose arguments for an alliterative *longue durée* were fraught with jingoism and racialism (for critical history see Cornelius 2012; Pearsall 1982: 34-6; Schiff 2011: 1-44). However, more recent scholarship eschews jingoism and racialism while reaffirming continuity in alliterative verse history. It does so by reconstructing a plausible formal trajectory for the alliterative meter, Old English to Early Middle English to Middle English (Cable 2009: 263-64; Minkova 2009a, 2009b; Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes 2007: 260-62; Russom 2004; Weiskott 2013a, 2013b; Yakovlev 2008). This research, grounded in the field of metrics, has wide-reaching ramifications for the study of Old English and Middle English literature. Indeed, the new wave of metrical research has begun to suggest the incoherence of the received period terms ‘Old English’ and ‘Middle English’ as such. With respect to the alliterative tradition, at least, medieval English literary history now appears most intelligible as a single nine-hundred-year sweep of continuity and change.

A primary impetus behind the progress in alliterative metrics has been increased attention to metrical evolution, that is, the process by which metrical norms are shaped and reshaped over time. Despite the potentially chauvinistic and teleological connotations of the term ‘evolution,’ this new research paradigm bears little resemblance to earlier views of the Alliterative Revival as an isolated, atavistic protest movement. The concept of evolution is used in these recent studies in the non-teleological sense it has acquired in present-day biology and linguistics, as opposed to the familiar nineteenth-century conceptions of evolutionary or linguistic history as essentially progressive or regressive. The adoption of a diachronic perspective onto the alliterative tradition has enabled
metrists to describe the evolution of metrical forms and features with unprecedented precision and without orienting that evolution toward or away from traditional landmarks in political, linguistic, and social history, such as the Norman Conquest of England (1066), the influx of French loanwords in English (twelfth and thirteenth c.), and the Black Death (1348-1350). In short, metrical study has been enriched by becoming more historical, in the same sense in which a historical perspective enriches the study of politics, language, and culture.

From Old to Middle English, certain aspects of the alliterative meter remained remarkably stable. Two forms of metrical continuity lend themselves to brief description. First, in all phases of the alliterative tradition, the metrical line consisted of two ‘half-lines,’ divided by a mid-line syntactical break or ‘caesura.’ Thus the first lines of Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (’|’) represents the caesura: “Hwæt we Gar-Dena | in geardagum” “Listen! We [have heard] of the Spear-Danes’ [glory] in days of yore”; “Sīpen þe sege and þe assaut | watz sesed at Troye” “After the siege and the onslaught was finished at Troy.” At no point in the evolution from Old to Middle English alliterative meter does the caesura cease to bear metrical significance. Second, in all phases of the alliterative tradition a binary distinction between content words (nouns, adjectives, etc.) and function words (articles, pronouns, etc.) determined metrical stress assignment (Cable 1991: 80; Duggan 1990; Momma 1997: 28-54; Russom 2009). Content words normally receive metrical stress, while function words normally do not. In the lines cited, the content words Gar-Dena, geardagum, sege, assault, sesed, and Troye receive metrical stress on their root syllable(s), while the function words hwæt, we, in, sīpen, þe, and, watz, and at do not. Thus (‘S’ represents a metrically stressed syllable, ‘x’ a metrically unstressed syllable): “Hwæt we Gar-Dena | in geardagum” (xxSSx | xSSx); “Sīpen þe sege and þe assaut | watz sesed at Troye” (xxxSxxxxS | xSxxSx).

Both forms of continuity—half-line structure and the hierarchy of content words and function words—served to distinguish alliterative meter from non-alliterative English metrical
traditions as these developed from the late twelfth century onward. In Chaucer’s fourteenth-century pentameter, for example, the unit of composition is the line, not the half-line, and metrical stress is determined by contextual phrasal and rhythmical contour as well as prosodic weight. Thus the opening line of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (metically stressed function words underlined): “*Whan* that Aprille *with* his shoures soote” (SxSxSxSxSx) or possibly “*Whan* *that* Aprillē *with* his shoures soote” (SxSxSxSxSx). Here the function words *when* (or possibly *that*) and *with* receive metrical stress due to their position beside prosodically lighter words and the expectation of an alternating rhythm. Promotion of function words and (after c. 1100) demotion of content words did occur in alliterative meter, but as uncommon metrical expedients rather than constitutive features of metrical stress assignment.

Other aspects of the alliterative metrical system changed or disappeared over the course of 900 years. Two forms of metrical change lend themselves to brief description. First, Old English meter accords a special license to verbal prefixes, *e.g.*, *be-* in *becuman* ‘become’ (Cable 1974: 32-44; Donoghue 1987; Suzuki 1995; Yakovlev 2008: 57-60). Unlike other metrically unstressed syllables, verbal prefixes may be omitted altogether from the metrical count (‘prefix license’). Thus (*p* represents a prefix): *Beowulf* 217a “Gewa [p]a ofer wægholm” “[the ship] went then over the billowy sea” (pSxxxxSS, metrically equivalent to SxxxxSS, a normal pattern). Verbal prefixes are less frequently omitted for the sake of meter in Early Middle English alliterative verse (Yakovlev 2008: 198-200); by the fourteenth century, the prefix license has disappeared from the metrical system. Second, in certain metrical positions Old English meter permitted alternation between monosyllabic (‘short’) and multisyllabic (‘long’) sequences of metrically unstressed syllables (‘dips’). In the first line of *Beowulf* cited above, for example, the first half-line begins with a long dip (SSSSx) while the second begins with a short dip (SxSSx). In the course of metrical history, alternation between short and long dips came to be regularized in the second half-line (Cable 1991: 66-84; Duggan 1986; Putter,
Jefferson, and Stokes 2007: 19-118; Yakovlev 2008: 89-154). By the fourteenth century the second half-line must contain one long dip. Thus, where the metrical patterns xSSx and xxSSx were equally acceptable for the Beowulf poet in either half-line, the Gawain poet avoids placing the pattern xSSx in the second half-line.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this continuous history of poetic practice, there survives no medieval theory of English alliterative meter. It is doubtful whether an alliterative *ars poetica* ever existed, for poets had little cause to theorize vernacular prosody at a time when English was a second choice to Latin in literary culture. From the seventh to the mid sixteenth century in England, *ars metrica* and *ars poetica* referred exclusively to Latin meter and were almost always composed in the Latin language (Lawler 2011: 46-50; Purcell 1996: 71-120; Ruff 2005). *Faute de mieux*, scholars have scoured alliterative poetry itself for pronouncements about poetic form. However, the four passages most often nominated as reflexive statements about meter are all better interpreted otherwise (Cornelius 2012: 270-71; Pearsall 1977: 153-54). Quite simply, for 900 years alliterative meter constituted an untheorized cultural practice. Evidently poets became inculcated in the alliterative tradition not through formal instruction but by repeated imitation of their contemporaries and predecessors. As a result, twenty-first-century theories of the alliterative metrical system have no direct medieval antecedents. The modern field of alliterative metrics reaches back only to the eighteenth century and later, when this meter was recognized first as quantitative, then as an arrangement of alliterating sounds, and finally and most enduringly as accentual (Cornelius 2015).

The absence of sustained theoretical attention to alliterative meter during the Middle Ages did not prevent meter from carrying cultural baggage. To the contrary, alliterative meter embodied and refracted many cultural forms over 900 years. For example, alliterative meter appears to have been persistently marked as vernacular in literary culture. Many of the most-copied alliterative poems are brief proverbs that survive only indirectly, in Latin or non-alliterative English contexts.
These alliterative snippets showcase sententiousness and vernacularity. Thus cultural preconceptions shaped the alliterative tradition at a fundamental level, that of manuscript survival. More broadly, the politics of alliterative writing changed profoundly after the twelfth century, when non-alliterative English meters were first introduced on the model of French, Italian, and Latin verse forms. Whereas Old English meter had occupied the entire space of English poetry, by the fourteenth century the alliterative meter has assumed a minor position in a newly diversified metrical landscape. The gradual marginalization of the alliterative tradition within the English literary field was a centuries-long cultural process that inflected the meaning and form of alliterative verse. The next section uses the case of Chaucer’s metaliterary comments to explore the idea of alliterative verse in late medieval English literary culture in greater detail.

The medieval English situation provides a particularly clear justification for Jarvis’s view that “[t]he history of verse thinking is not the same as the history of representations of verse thinking.” In English literary history, the practice of poetics predates the theory of prosody by 900 years. On a long view, the emergence and consolidation of prosodic metadiscourse, not the practice of meter, is the historical process in need of special explanation. In this way, the alliterative tradition defamiliarizes the nineteenth- and twentieth-century prosodic discourses analyzed by Martin. The “more interesting [i.e. theoretical] questions” adumbrated by Prins must themselves be understood as historically specific, insofar as they depend on post-medieval critical categories. The absence of a metadiscourse of vernacular prosody in medieval English literary culture directs attention to meter as an unselfconscious ingrained practice, that is, a **habitus**, in both the medieval and the Bourdieusian sense of the term. To say this is not to isolate medieval English meters from culture or history but, on the contrary, to begin to identify the forms through which poetic traditions functioned as cultural institutions.
If medieval English writers almost never set about to construct theoretical explanations for vernacular poetic practices, they could nevertheless perceive those practices, represent them poetically, and deploy stereotypes about them. Poets working after the introduction of non-alliterative English meters in the twelfth century certainly recognized the metrical choices that lay before them. Yet this recognition was always mediated by longer histories of metrical form, as summarized for alliterative verse in the previous section. The twelfth-century schism between the alliterative tradition and English poetry per se had a lasting impact on late medieval perceptions of this verse form, indeed a more lasting impact than late medieval writers themselves could have appreciated. Given changes in language, orthography, meter, and forms of textualization1 between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, one might doubt whether Middle English poets or audiences knew the first thing about Old English poems (Cameron 1974; Sauer 1997). It is telling that one of the most explicit medieval comments about alliterative meter came in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, roughly 200 years after alliterative meter first became visible as one of several metrical choices in the vernacular. It is also telling that this comment came from a non-practitioner: Geoffrey Chaucer.

Chaucer (d. 1400) was a bureaucrat, a courtier, a translator, and a vernacular poetic innovator. His use of the English language connects him to, but also distinguishes him from, contemporary and earlier writers working in English, French, Italian, and Latin. Almost uniquely among pre-1400 poets, Chaucer is no less easily categorized as a European writer who happened to write in English than as an English writer with international aspirations (Butterfield 2009: 8-10;

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1 Old English poetry was always laid out as prose. From the middle of the thirteenth century, lineated format became the norm for English poetry, though prose format remained an (increasingly uncommon) option well into the sixteenth century.
Smith 2006). His attachments to meters mirror his attachments to languages. Over the course of his career, Chaucer pushed the boundaries of the non-alliterative English metrical traditions as these had developed for two centuries before his birth. A master of the French-derived English tetrameter, Chaucer also synthesized French and Italian precursors to craft a new English meter, known today as the pentameter (Duffell 2000, 2014). Although his literary canonization over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries helped render the alliterative tradition alien for later writers and scholars, in his own day Chaucer typified the sensibilities of an aggressive London literary avant-garde—in matters metrical no less than in other respects.

In what has become the most famous medieval remark about alliterative verse, Chaucer has his Parson declare to the other Canterbury Tales pilgrims, “I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettre” (X 43; all quotations of Chaucer are fr. Chaucer 1987). The Parson’s remark is often pressed into service as evidence of the provincialism of the Middle English alliterative tradition. Yet it is not primarily intended to denigrate alliterative verse but to characterize the Parson as one totally lacking in poetic skill (Mueller 2013: 5-6). If alliterative meter is not supposed to rate highly for Chaucer’s London audience, it nevertheless makes the short-list of forms that lie beyond the Parson’s abilities. That he rhymes “but litel bettre” (X 44) and is “nat textueel” (X 57) belies the Parson’s excuse for foregoing alliterative meter (“I am a Southren man,” X 42), and it is by no means certain that Chaucer is here endorsing the designation of alliterative verse as low-brow, provincial, and generically typecast. The immediate meaning of the reference seems to be only that a bumbling southerner would be likely to disparage alliterative poetry in this way. Ultimately, the value of mentioning the “‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettre” may not be metropolitan snobbery so much as the implication that Chaucer himself was better informed about alliterative verse. Indeed, in two much-discussed battle sequences (Canterbury Tales I 2601-20 and Legend of Good Women 637-49), Chaucer adorns his pentameter with alliteration in an apparently unironic gesture toward alliterative chivalric
Chaucer's other use of “geeste” as a formal term, this time as a noun, does little to clarify his perceptions of the alliterative tradition. After he has interrupted the mock-romance _Sir Thopas_, the Host’s injunction to Chaucer the pilgrim to “tellen aught in geeste” (VII 933) cannot refer to romance generally, yet it is unclear whether it can refer to alliterative romance specifically (as the note in Chaucer 1987 guesses on the basis of X 43). Elsewhere in Chaucer, “geestes” are classical and/or lengthy (hi)stories (Canterbury Tales II 1126, III 642, and IV 2284; House of Fame 1515 and 1518; etc.). Moreover, both Canterbury Tales passages draw a primary formal distinction, not between alliterative and non-alliterative meters, but between (alliterative) romance and (didactic) prose (“telle in prose somwhat,” VII 934, and “I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose,” X 46). Chaucer expects his audience to recognize the alliterative tradition as one territory within this broader formal/generic division. The difficulty of mapping medieval testimonia about poetic form onto modern analytical categories illustrates the extent to which such testimonia emerge under pressure from other kinds of historical discourse, in this case discourses of class, literary genre, and regionalism.

Taken together, these two Chaucerian one-liners begin to define a continuum of perception within which the alliterative tradition operated in the late medieval centuries. On the one hand, Chaucer marks off the alliterative meter as socially, generically, and geographically exotic. The implicit comparisons in the first passage between the homely and the sophisticated, between romance and everything else, and between the south and the north of England serve to consolidate Chaucer’s position in a literary and cultural avant-garde. On the other hand, the alliterative meter also appears in the first passage as a skill, a cultural practice that eludes a plainspoken southern parson. If “geeste” in the second passage refers to alliterative verse in particular, it provides a second indication that late medieval writers could understand alliterative meter as an acquired literary practice, distinct from prose but also distinct from other meters (such as Chaucer-the-pilgrim’s bombastic tail rhyme
in Thopas). All of these perceptions of the alliterative meter had a history already in the fourteenth century, and all of them would gain further traction in the following two centuries, as alliterative verse became increasingly marginalized within the English literary field. The next section explores the perception and practice of alliterative meter in the century and a half after Chaucer’s death.

Internal views of the alliterative tradition, from the perspective of a practicing poet, a scribe, or a well-versed reader, must have differed from Chaucer’s external view. Chaucer’s Parson gives voice to a prosodic stereotype: like all stereotypes, this one exaggerates certain features of its target and ignores others. In fact, none of the Parson’s three implied opinions about alliterative verse—that it is northern, low-class, and circumscribed by the genre of romance—do justice to contemporary poetic practice. First, the alliterative tradition was not an exclusively northern institution. Piers Plowman, by far the best-attested Middle English alliterative poem, partially takes place in London and certainly circulated in manuscript there; the poem has been thought to mark a significant juncture in London literary history (Hanna 2005: 243-304). Some other fourteenth-century alliterative poems were likely composed in or near the metropolis, e.g., A Bird in Bishopswood and A Complaint against Blacksmiths (Kennedy 1987; Salter 1988: 199-214). Second, alliterative poets labored in the same multilingual and international literary environment as Chaucer. Many Middle English alliterative poems take the form of direct translations of French or Latin texts; others show mastery of subtle theological distinctions or the finer points of courtly cuisine. Alliterative poetry embodied rather than antagonized an upwardly mobile English poetic establishment. Third, alliterative verse comes in more flavors than romance. Piers Plowman can be variously classified as a political tract, an allegorical debate, a satirical treatise, and a prophecy: it is perhaps least easily apprehended as a romance. The poet of the arch-romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is also thought to have composed Cleanness and Patience, two theological/homiletic treatises in alliterative meter.
Evident discrepancies between the terms in which Chaucer discussed alliterative meter and the terms in which it was actually practiced in his lifetime do not negate or falsify Chaucer’s perceptions. To the contrary, the discrepancies illustrate an important point about meter and the perception of meter: the former always potentially exceeds (or, put another way, fails to live up to) the latter. In the two passages discussed in this section, Chaucer puts the idea, but not the practice, of alliterative meter to work. One reason to take such work seriously would be to weave metrical perceptions into cultural history. Another reason would be to offer a critique of metrical historiography. For even if they are increasingly recognized as polemical, the opinions of Chaucer’s Parson still roughly organize the modern study of alliterative verse, which centers on issues of metrical form, linguistic dialect, vernacularity, and literary genre. Metrists, dialecticians, theorists of the Middle English vernacular, and specialists in romance have all devoted more attention to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* than to *Patience*. (The outlier here, as in many other respects, is *Piers Plowman*, the study of which practically constitutes a field unto itself—for better and for worse.)

Through the Parson, Chaucer dramatizes an attitude toward the alliterative tradition that would gain momentum over the subsequent centuries. Scrutiny of the surviving alliterative corpus reveals the ways in which that attitude overstates the late fourteenth-century English metrical-cultural situation.

The *Canterbury Tales* represents perhaps the first time in the history of alliterative verse that metaliterary perceptions were expressed with enough specificity to begin to tell the cultural stakes of meter. Alliterative verse had always been a culturally charged idea and series of practices; Chaucer identified it as a topic for conversation as well. The conversation about alliterative meter went on in fits and starts from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century and then, in a more professional mode, from the eighteenth century to the present. Both of these conversations, separated by the unalliterative seventeenth century, are of intrinsic historical interest, and either might be made the subject of a cultural history in the style of Martin 2012. Yet I have suggested here that historians of
verse must not allow historical discourses to occlude historical poetic practices. A historiographical approach is simply impracticable for alliterative verse, as discussed in the previous section. More fundamentally, the cultural meaning of reflexive commentary on meter remains underspecified when divorced from analysis of the metrical-cultural situation that the commentary addresses. To compare Chaucer’s perceptions of alliterative verse to alliterative verse itself is not to explain away cultural anxieties about meter, as though meter were an ontological reality and the perceptions merely incorrect propositions about it. Rather, comparing perception and practice precisely serves to enrich our understanding of metrical cultures as the sites where the largest cultural discourses and the smallest metrical choices interpenetrate. In the case of the alliterative tradition, the extreme rarity and severe inadequacy of contemporary accounts of this meter are salient features of the tradition itself, and features that can only be appreciated by combining formalist and historicist methodologies.

*The Alliterative Tradition after 1450: Perceptions and Practice*

In the decades after Chaucer’s death, the cultural meaning of English meter changed in unprecedented ways. Through normal literary influence, the increasingly central position of London in English literary culture, and some special pleading by Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, William Caxton, and other taste-makers, Chaucer’s pentameter rapidly ascended the ranks of English meters. The fifteenth century witnessed the inception of a Chaucer canonization industry that quickly, and influentially, installed Chaucer atop a newly metropolitan hierarchy of English poets. The Chaucer canonization industry was also a pentameter canonization industry: by the end of the fifteenth century, the pentameter had come to occupy the position of honor in a reconfigured metrical menu. Not coincidentally, the fifteenth century was also the last full century of the alliterative tradition. The
last extant alliterative poems were composed in the middle or second quarter of the sixteenth century, after which time the alliterative meter disappeared from the active repertoire of English verse forms. This section considers the period between 1450 and 1550 as a turning point in alliterative verse history and a new phase in the interplay between metrical perceptions and metrical practice.

In contrast to the relative abundance of alliterative poetry dating from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, there are extant only eight (unrhymed) alliterative poems datable to after 1450: the *Ireland Prophecy* (Weiskott forthcoming) and *New Index of Middle English Verse* (NIMEV) 1967.8, political prophecies containing coded references to the Wars of the Roses (late fifteenth c.); the *Prophecie of Beid, Prophecie of Bertlington, Prophecie of Waldbane*, and *Prophecie of Gildas* in the printed *Whole Prophesie of Scotland, &c.* (first published 1603), which allude to significant post-1450 dates or events; William Dunbar’s *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* (c. 1500), a synthesis of romance, satire, and didacticism; and *Scottish Field* (1515-47), a victory composition on the occasion of the Battle of Flodden (1513). It is easy now to take a teleological view and categorize these eight poems as remainders of a tradition that had already produced its geniuses and suffered its death-blow. But the poets themselves were unburdened by either hindsight or foreknowledge. None of the eight post-1450 poems gives the impression that the alliterative meter was felt to be in need of defense or rehabilitation. None of them apologizes for the choice. The alliterative meter remained a viable choice for poets writing in English after 1450.

All the same, the eight surviving post-1450 poems testify to the increasing marginalization of alliterative poetry in literary culture. The perceived capacities of the alliterative form must have undergone severe restriction after 1450. Fully six of the eight poems are political prophecies; all eight have connections to Scotland, whether thematic, geographical, or codicological. All eight are recorded in northern dialect forms in manuscript and early print. The long-mooted idea “that
alliterative poetry retreated northwards under pressure from London English and the Chaucerian tradition,” which Derek Pearsall in an important essay found “difficult to resist” (1982: 38), describes a late medieval cultural stereotype about alliterative meter as much as it describes an actual historical process. The feedback loop between poets, printers, compilers, scribes, and an incipient reading public colored the alliterative tradition northern after 1450, completing a process of prosodic typecasting that had begun at least a century earlier.

The pivotal event in the final chapter of alliterative verse history was the appearance in 1550 of the first print edition of Piers Plowman, edited by Robert Crowley (Stinson 2008: 178-81). Two more printings followed in rapid succession later in the same year. Here an alliterative poem has become the object of quasi-scholarly inquiry. Crowley’s brief preface, “The Printer to the Reader,” is a monument in the history of textual criticism. It features, inter alia, description of alliteration as a formal feature (“the nature of hys miter is, to haue thre wordes at the leaste in euery verse whiche beginne with some one letter,” Short Title Catalogue [STC] 19906, ii). Especially significant in the present context is Crowley’s perception that alliterative meter is old-fashioned: “He [Langland] wrote altogyther in miter: but not after y’ maner of our rimers that write nowe adayes (for his verses ende not alike)” (ii). This remark implies that Crowley did not regard alliterative meter as a live option in 1550 (with rimers ‘poets’ as well as ‘poets who compose in rhyme’). It also implies Crowley’s expectation that his readers might not recognize the metrical form of Piers Plowman. Nevertheless, Crowley trusts that his prefatory remarks on verse form will enable readers to enjoy the meter of Piers Plowman (“This thinge [i.e., alliteration] noted, the miter shal be very pleasaunt to read,” ii).

In addition to marking alliterative meter as obsolescent, Crowley anticipates later writers in associating alliterative meter with the genre of political prophecy. In his preface, Crowley takes pains to dispute the authenticity and interpretation of two passages in Piers Plowman that might be
construed as prophecies ("And that which foloweth and geueth it the face of a propheycye is lyke to be a thinge added of some other man than the fyrste autour" and "Loke not vpon this boke therfore, to talke of wonders paste or to come," ii). Significantly, Crowley titled his edition *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, and later commentators would read the poem in this form as well as continuing to read manuscript copies. Crowley’s desire to foreclose a political-apocalyptic interpretation of *Piers Plowman* may have partly motivated him to produce his edition. In his *Scripторum illustrium maioris Bryttanie* (1557-59), John Bale notes that Langland “foretold many things prophetically, which we have seen fulfilled in our days” [prophetice pluræ preâdictit, quæ nostris diebus impeleri uidimus] (STC 1296a, 474; translation mine). In a passing mention of *Piers Plowman* in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), George Puttenham likewise dubs Langland “a very true Prophet” of the Reformation (STC 20519, 50). And the unnamed author of the *Petition directed to Her Most Excellent Maiestie* (1591), sometimes identified as the pamphleteer Job Throckmorton, cites *Piers Plowman* as political prophecy: “*Piers Plowman* likewise wrote against the state of Bishops, and prophecied their fall in these wordes” (STC 1522a, 34). These notices join the evidence of the eight extant post-1450 alliterative poems in suggesting the extent to which alliterative meter and political prophecy overlapped in perception and practice after 1450. *Piers Plowman* was the major vehicle for this form of prosodic stereotyping in the sixteenth century (Davis 2002; Horobin 2011: 361-65; Jansen 1989; Kelen 2007: 32-8; Jones 2011; Scase 2007; Warner 2014: 72-86).

The generic coloring that attached to the alliterative form by the sixteenth century explains the comments of Crowley, Bale, Puttenham, and the author of the *Petition*. It also explains the practice of the poets responsible for the six post-1450 alliterative prophecies. Finally, it explains the preservation of these poems. Four of them survive because of their inclusion in the printed *Whole Prophesie of Scotland, &c.*, issued to celebrate the accession of a Scottish king to the English throne (James VI/I), a key prediction of medieval English political prophecies. The other two, the *Ireland
Prophecy and NIMEV 1967.8, appear in large fifteenth- and sixteenth-century manuscript anthologies of prophecies and political writings. The prophetic context of these poems suggests another reason to historicize poetic practices and perceptions: this is often the best way to contextualize historical trends in transmission and preservation. Taken together, the composition, copying, printing, editing, and interpretation of alliterative poetry after 1450 register the same intensifying typecasting in literary culture.

In comparison with earlier periods of alliterative verse history as discussed in the previous two sections, the scarcity of alliterative verse after 1450 caused more significant overlap between the practice and perception of meter. Indeed, one might well reverse this analysis and interpret the scarcity of post-1450 alliterative verse as a symptom rather than a cause of metrical stereotyping. In a process familiar from other chapters of literary and cultural history, in the case of alliterative verse typecasting, marginalization, and scarcity entered into a powerful feedback loop. The result was the death of a millennium-old poetic tradition (and, not coincidentally, the cultural promotion of a new one, the pentameter tradition). The last phase of the alliterative tradition was also the first in which the practice of alliterative meter approximately lived up to (or, put another way, was reduced to) a set of rigid cultural preconceptions. Scottish Field, a late alliterative non-prophecy, shows that poets who chose the alliterative meter after 1450 were not automatically beholden to the genre of political prophecy; but the non-prophetic content of this alliterative poem must have constituted a heavily marked choice by 1515, the earliest possible date for the poem. And then, the topic of the poem (a northern military confrontation between England and Scotland) plays squarely into another stereotype about alliterative poetry, that it is northern. The case of late alliterative verse illustrates how cultural preconceptions can come to stigmatize poetic practices, and how poetic practices can come to reinforce cultural preconceptions.
The final 100 years of alliterative verse (c. 1450-1550) mark the juncture at which intrinsic and extrinsic modern approaches to alliterative meter most directly coincide. In part, this is due to the wider scope of the conversation about English meters in the sixteenth century, a development examined in greater detail in the conclusion of this essay. At the same time, the conformity of poetic perceptions to poetic practice in the alliterative tradition must itself be recognized as a culturally significant development, one that distinguishes post-1450 alliterative verse from earlier phases of the tradition. A corollary of holding, with Jarvis, that “[t]he relationship between thinking about verse and thinking in verse is not necessarily a cooperative one” is affirming that, sometimes, the relationship does become cooperative. And yet, for the alliterative tradition at least, such cooperation signaled a narrowing of the metrical imaginary. Meter was able to think less as proto-prosodists were able to think more about it. From the longer perspective of metrical practice reaching back to Old English, post-1450 alliterative verse can be seen to illustrate its own marginalization in ever broader brushstrokes. In line with Prins’s dictum that “the sound of poetry is never heard without mediation,” the prosodic typecasting of alliterative verse constituted an important form of mediation interceding between medieval poetic practice and modern ears. However, such typecasting emerged after 1450 as a new (or newly important) form of mediation in the long alliterative tradition.

Conclusion: Literary History and the History of Prosody

At the turn of the seventeenth century and for some time afterwards, alliterative verse was hardly ever read or studied. The sixteenth century witnessed the inauguration of medieval studies as a field of historical inquiry. However, the focus of the earliest publications was on Old English prose (Graham 2000, 2001). Individual manuscript codices of medieval English verse, such as the Junius
manuscript of Old English poetry and the Percy Folio of Middle English poetry, would not be
mobilized as historical evidence until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Crowley’s edition of
*Piers Plowman* (reissued in 1561 by Owen Rogers) is an aberration in many ways, and the experiment
was not repeated until Thomas Whitaker’s edition of 1813. After 1700, the story of alliterative verse
and the story of alliterative metrics intertwined and reinforced one another, as successive generations
of prosodists sought to make sense of the form, history, and cultural meaning of a defunct English
meter. Anyone who proposes to say anything about alliterative verse today is necessarily heir to a
literary history as well as a history of prosodic study.

A contemporary student of verse whose work particularly reflects the vicissitudes of literary
history and the history of prosody (albeit *malgré lui*) is the poet-critic James Fenton (Jones 2010:
1009-1011). In the opening of his *Introduction to English Poetry* (2002), Fenton excludes Old English
poetry from consideration on the grounds that “[i]t is somebody else’s poetry” (1). Fenton confides,
“I can’t accept that there is any continuity between the traditions of Anglo-Saxon poetry and those
established in English poetry by the time of, say, Shakespeare” (1). He goes on to reject Middle
English poetry as well, though “[w]ith Chaucer we are much nearer home” (2). Predictably, Fenton’s
chronological dividing line between “somebody else’s poetry” and its unstated opposite, ‘our poetry,’
coincides with the English Reformation. Such schematic periodization takes literary history back to
the brave new world of Puttenham, who opined in his *Arte of English Poesie* that “beyond that time
[i.e., the reigns of Edward III and Richard II] there is litle or nothing worth commendation to be
founde written in this arte [i.e., verse]” (48).

For Puttenham, the reasons for the irrelevance of pre-1327 English poetry were (explicitly)
political, intellectual, legal, linguistic, and (implicitly) racial. He writes of “the late Normane
conquest, which had brought into this Realme much alteration both of our langage and lawes, and
there withall a certain martiall barbarousnes, whereby the study of all good learning was so much
decayd, as long time after no man or very few intended to write in any laudable science” (48). In 1589 this was a powerful new insight into the shape of English literary history. Indeed, Puttenham’s is one of the earliest attempts to constitute English literary history as a discrete field of inquiry. He describes the goal of his investigation this way:

that their [i.e., English poets’] names should not be defrauded of such honour as seemeth due to them for hauing by their thankefull studies so much beautified our English tong (as at this day it will be found our nation is in nothing inferiour to the French or Italian for copie of language, subtiltie of deuice, good method and proportion in any forme of poeme, but that they may compare with the most, and perchance passe a great many of them.

(48)

By 2002 Fenton could activate the same discourses of nation, language, and race without identifying them as such, except to remark that “English poetry begins whenever we decide to say the modern English language begins” (1). Moreover, Puttenham’s own milieu has become for Fenton the decisive watershed, further aligning the putatively spasmodic history of English poetry with the consolidation of the discourses on which that history rests.

If the rationale for Fenton’s periodization of English poetry is explicitly linguistic, it is also implicitly metrical: he favorably compares Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, composed in pentameter, to the alliterative *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The latter is “baffling and incomprehensible by turns” (Fenton 2002: 1), the former “much nearer home, both linguistically and in terms of poetic practice” (2). Fenton’s presentism here echoes the Old Historian’s narrative that characterized alliterative poetry as a backwater tradition, drowning in the welter of new literary forms in the Age of Chaucer. As this essay has sought to demonstrate, the alliterative tradition itself largely transcended such stereotypes, at least before 1450. In the thirteenth century, alliterative meter lost its position as the default English verse form. But this meter endured, and the poets who continued to use it produced some of the most memorable poetry of the medieval centuries, not, in all likelihood, for king or for
court—certainly not for country—but because of the cultural momentum that accrues to a poetic tradition over time, or what might be called metrical hysteresis. Alliterative meter does not so much rise or fall as stay put: it plods.

Cursory as they are, Fenton’s remarks illustrate how the discipline of literary study, including the study of prosody, can retrospectively simplify literary history and obscure the cultural stakes of poetic forms. Like Puttenham, Fenton compartmentalizes the poetic past into binaries: Anglo-Saxon and English, local and cosmopolitan, popular and literary, medieval and modern. Insistence on such binaries has long since ceased to be a feature of literary-critical discourse, yet their force continues to be felt in the way in which research fields are organized and individual texts or authors are judged. Chaucer (to take the egregium exemplum) continues to occupy a central position in English studies precisely because he is (perceived to be) the most typically English, cosmopolitan, literary—in a word, modern—medieval British author. But, of course, Chaucer inaugurates a modern literary or linguistic tradition only from the retrospect of later centuries (Cannon 1998: 179-220). This is not to say that modernity and modernization are simply foreign subjects for a medievalist historical poetics—as though there could ever have been a Middle Ages without two somethings to be in the middle of! Rather, study of medieval English verse must continually strive to unthink the inevitability of modern poetic categories while retracing, in many cases, the very histories that created those categories. In this sense, the alliterative meter—a medieval verse form with no direct modern descendant—poses the problem of modernity acutely. I have tried to show that the rewards of historicism are proportional to the risk of presentism.

This essay focused on the subset of medieval English poetry known as alliterative verse. It did so for the same reason that Fenton found Troilus and Criseyde “much nearer home” than Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Left turns and blind alleys in literary history have alienated modern commentators from the alliterative tradition. As a result, close study of alliterative meter captures the
historical distance of medieval English literary culture with particular clarity. However, my emphasis on poetic practice applies more generally to the study of early English poetry. By the fourteenth century, alliterative meter was one of many untheorized English verse forms. Chaucer, for example, was evidently able to compose thousands of lines of pentameter—an English meter he is usually credited with inventing—without ever naming this new meter or discussing it explicitly. Two centuries earlier, the poets of Poema Morale (c. 1180) and Ormulum (late twelfth c.) had drawn on Latin models to create what was then a radically new English meter, the septenary. Neither of these poems is intelligible outside the context of the history of medieval Latin writing, including the long tradition of Latin metrical treatises. Yet neither poem offers any commentary on its own metrical form, apart from two vague references in the Dedication of the Ormulum to rime ‘poem; meter’ (Cannon 2004: 93, 96). In sum, the case of medieval verse reveals how much larger the history of poetry is than the history of prosodical study in the English tradition.

In conclusion, a word on the broader methodological implications of the kind of historical poetics modeled in this essay. The disciplinary formation of literary studies is often understood as a vacillation between form and history: an Old Historicism, keyed to political history, coexisted with German-style philology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, followed by the valorization of the literary text as a self-contained object in the New Criticism, followed by the revaluation of history in the New Historicism and various strands of cultural studies—or so the story goes (more nuanced accounts: Attridge 2008; Liu 1989; Strier 2002). Newer critical approaches to literature synthesize form and history by retracing the shapes of particular historical series, such as the history of the material book or the history of contact between English and other language traditions. In one sense, the present essay adds momentum to the cyclicity of critical history by joining recent calls for a New Formalism that would return the focus of literary studies to literary form while affirming the theoretical and ideological critiques of the past forty years (Cohen 2007;
Lerer 2003; Levine 2006; Levinson 2007; Loesberg 1999; Marshall and Buchanan 2011; Tucker 2006). In another sense, this essay has sought to transcend the formalism/historicism dichotomy by reading poetic form as an important kind of history and exploring the continuum between the practice and the theory of verse. One salutary feature of the rubric of ‘historical poetics’ is that it connects form and history inextricably—even if, as discussed earlier, the definitions of the history and the poetics of historical poetics have been contentious.

The story of early English poetry is neither one of decay and neglect nor of the inevitable triumph of a language or a culture. That this story unfolded for centuries without the help of a movement or a school or a theory, political, intellectual, or literary, suggests the inadequacy of some traditional literary-historical terms of engagement. Specifically, the conversation about the historical contextualization of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English poetics, recently reinvigorated by Prins and taken up in turn by Jackson, Martin, Jarvis, Culler, and others, needs to acknowledge the historicity of its subject and its methods. Generalizations about Poetry with a capital ‘P,’ or about the present-day study of its forms and histories, can be sharpened by taking early English poetry into consideration. In this essay, I identified two broad domains for reconstructing what was thinkable in medieval English verse: metrical practice and metrical perception. The key insight afforded by study of alliterative verse history is that practice and perception are independent domains, whose intermittent cooperation should be discovered through theorization and close reading rather than projected from the study of one onto the study of the other. Recognition of the ways in which modern questions fail to illuminate medieval meters is the first step toward a more capacious historical poetics. It is also a way to specify the historicity of modern English meters, modern prosodic metadiscourse, and the contemporary study of both.
References


