2019

Susan E. Deskis, Alliterative Proverbs in Medieval England: Language Choice and Literary Meaning

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Though small in scope, proverbs may reveal much about the texts, genres, and literary cultures in which they appear. Susan E. Deskis has two aims in her book *Alliterative Proverbs in Medieval England: Language Choice and Literary Meaning*: ‘to employ the study of alliterative proverbs as an index of continuity in the verbal culture of medieval England, particularly across the divide of the Norman Conquest’; and ‘to explore the range of ways in which alliterative proverbs contributed to the language ecologies within which they functioned’ (p. 133; for ‘language ecology’ see pp. 5f.). The first of these aims is pursued in chapter 2, in which Deskis collects evidence for continuities in the use and formation of alliterative proverbs in Old and Middle English. The second aim is pursued in chapters 3 and 4, which survey the incidence and meaning of alliterative proverbs in proverb collections and gnomic poems, devotional prose, ethnography (represented by Gerald of Wales’s *Descriptio Kambriae*), sermons, romance, lyric, and drama. Chapter 1 provides a historical and methodological introduction. Chapter 5 briefly recapitulates chapters 2–4. The end-matter includes an index of proverbs, organized according to the scheme of Bartlett Whiting’s *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly before 1500*, the standard reference work in this area.

In Deskis’s account, alliterative proverbs are a sub-genre distinguished by ‘alliteration of at least two content words’ (p. 14) and affiliated uncertainly with alliterative verse (pp. 2–5), with which they jointly demonstrate the importance of alliteration as a ‘feature of the broader verbal repertoire in both Old English and Middle English’ (p. 5). (The *OED* possibly confuses matters by including alliteration in its basic definition of ‘proverb’.) One of the difficulties in this research programme is to distinguish alliterative proverbs from collocations and phrases. This difficulty is acute in chapter 2, where Deskis has the ingenious idea to seek out proverbs that, while first recorded in Middle English, may have existed earlier. Though Deskis generally avoids claiming more than the evidence allows, this chapter suffers from poor organization and under-articulation of argument. Remarks of general importance appear *passim* within an annotated list of proverbs (see especially the discussion of ‘Lief Child behoves lore (Whiting C216)’, pp. 25–9) and remain undeveloped, for there is no sustained interpretative discussion. What is lacking here is perhaps a contrastive field – that is, an articulated awareness of the ways that lexical items may be brought together by traditional literary forms other than the proverb. Homiletic address is one relevant example (cf. pp. 27f.). Analysis of verse would benefit from concepts of poetic formula and poetic variation (instanced in *Christ III*, l. 1047, quoted at
p. 31). J. P. Oakden’s long lists of alliterative phrases (Alliterative Poetry in Middle English, vol. 2, part III) might provoke further useful thinking about ‘alliterative collocation’, a recurring term in Deskis’s chapter 2, but treated most clearly in a later chapter (p. 131).

The strengths of this book lie in chapters 3 and 4. Among the highlights are discussion of the Disticha Catonis, Proverbs of Alfred, and Proverbs of Hendyng (pp. 65–79), and of the proverbs ‘Better is List than lither strength (L381)’ (pp. 82–90) and ‘After Bale comes boot (B18)’ (pp. 100–12). Deskis traces B18 through five Middle English romances and remarks on the suitability of this proverb to the episodic structure of romance (pp. 107, 111). Curiously, Deskis finds that alliterative proverbs are rare in alliterative verse (pp. 111f., 136f., an observation that may challenge her earlier claims for an affinity between these two forms.

Deskis’s introductory chapter offers a judicious précis of current thinking about the ‘alliterative revival’ and medieval multilingualism. The bibliography in chapters 3 and 4 is likewise strong. On p. 12 a transcription error throws a quotation and its translation into confusion: for materias trascendunt read materias que transcendunt. Though chapter 2 is under-developed, this slim book will reward the attention of students and scholars interested in the literature and languages of medieval England, and especially those interested in such topics as the status of medieval English and its relations with French and Latin, the formation and subsequent histories of early English proverbs, continuities between the literary cultures of early and late medieval England, and the use and significance of alliterating proverbs in Middle English literature.

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This book aims to show that the Old English verse-line was the ‘historical progenitor’ of Middle English alliterative verse. Ian Cornelius begins with a useful history of metrical studies from Sievers on, culminating in research focusing on Old English metrics, the ‘crowning achievement’ being a D.Phil. thesis by Nicolay Yakovlev ‘The development of the alliterative metre from Old to Middle English’ (Oxford, 2008). Drawing heavily on Yakovlev’s study throughout, Cornelius makes the claim that ‘Lawman’s Brut occupies a central place in the development of English alliterative meter’. The thesis of this book stands or falls on the establishment of this claim. This introductory chapter concludes with a preliminary analysis of the metre of Piers Plowman as most scholars would now recognize it.