



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago
Loyola eCommons

English: Faculty Publications and Other Works

Faculty Publications and Other Works by
Department

2019

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

Ian Cornelius

Loyola University Chicago, icornelius@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/english_facpubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cornelius, Ian. Susan E. Deskis, Alliterative Proverbs in Medieval England: Language Choice and Literary Meaning. *Medium Aevum*, 88, 1: 159-160, 2019. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, English: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
© The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2019.

Susan E. Deskis, *Alliterative Proverbs in Medieval England: Language Choice and Literary Meaning* (Columbus, Oh.: The Ohio State University Press, 2016). ix + 163 pp. ISBN 978-0-8142-1309-4. \$84.95.

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 Deski'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). Deski 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, Deski 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.

Deski'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 transcendunt* 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.

Loyola University Chicago

IAN CORNELIUS

Ian Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 99 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). x + 219 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-15410-0. £75.00.

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.

Copyright of Medium Aevum is the property of Society for the Study of Medieval Languages & Literature and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.