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# It's Complicated: Some Irregular Line-ending Morphosyllabic Sequences in *Piers Plowman* B\*

Ian Cornelius

## Abstract

Scholarship on the meter of fourteenth-century English alliterative verse demonstrates that lines end with a trochaic constituent. *Piers Plowman* is a recognized anomaly, yet there is disagreement about the extent of the differences. Focusing on the B version of the poem, this essay examines line endings with an irregular word division, syllable count, or vocalic quality. Particular attention is given to lines ending in personal pronouns, *-ly* adverbs, compounds in *-man*, compounds in *-nesse*, nouns in *-(i)oun*, and gerunds. Prosodic constraints are identified by comparing the incidence of each sequence at the close of the a-verse and b-verse. Many individual items skew towards the norms of usage observed in other alliterative poems, yet, more than other alliterative poets, Langland allows semantic and expository priorities to override prosodic form.

**keywords:** *Piers Plowman*, meter, Middle English, alliterative verse

## 1 Introduction

In a concise and elegant argument published in 1991, Thomas Cable demonstrated that the lines of *Cleanness*, a fourteenth-century poem in English alliterative verse, have a uniform final cadence.<sup>1</sup> Whatever rhythmic variety may unfold within the poetic line, each line closes with a trochaic constituent.<sup>2</sup> The elegance of the demonstration consisted in Cable's way of moving outward from a basic structural feature of alliterative meter, universally acknowledged in modern scholarship. Lines of alliterative verse are bipartite, consisting of two unequal half-lines divided by a fixed caesura. Certain words, Cable showed, appear routinely at the end of the first half-line ("a-verse"), but never, or almost never, at the end of the second half-line ("b-verse"). The distributions correlate with prosodic shape:

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Cable, *The English Alliterative Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1991), 66–84, 168–69.

<sup>2</sup>The term "trochaic constituent" is from Geoffrey Russom, "The Evolution of Middle English Alliterative Meter," in *Studies in the History of the English Language II: Unfolding Conversations*, ed. Anne Curzan and Kimberly Emmons (Berlin, 2004), 279–304. See below, n31. Cable's term for the same prosodic element is "feminine ending." A note on prosodic terminology: "lift" and "metrical stress" are equivalent terms; the contrasting prosodic element is a "dip." A "short dip" is a single unstressed syllable delimited by lifts or by a lift and the right or left edge of a verse. A "long dip" is a sequence of two or more unstressed or weakly stressed syllables. A trochaic constituent is a lift followed by a short dip.

words that would yield a non-trochaic contour are absent from line-ending position. To avoid circularity, Cable's demonstration requires an independent evidentiary basis for judging the prosodic shape of words. This is supplied by derivation and historical grammar, archives of linguistic knowledge built up over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mostly on the basis of other corpora, for previous linguistic scholarship had judged that Middle English alliterative poems were too irregular or poorly understood to supply the kind of prosodic information that Cable now employed to elucidate the prosody of *Cleanness*. Hence his demonstration is not guilty of *petitio principii*. Cable also recognized that his thesis had been mooted previously, towards the end of the nineteenth century, and he offered reasons why, after an interval of a hundred years, the thesis should now be approved.<sup>3</sup> The reasons concern both the intervening accumulation of philological observation and changes in the theoretical framework of historical philology. Finally, Cable stated that *Cleanness* figures in his argument as an illustrative example; the prosodic regularities demonstrated in analysis of *Cleanness* hold true for most other fourteenth-century English alliterative poems.

The "Cable-Duggan" debates ensued, shaping the direction of subsequent inquiry.<sup>4</sup> At issue was the persistence, or not, of etymological and grammatical weak final *-e* in northern and north-midland dialects. Cable's scansions relied on weak final *-e* to supply the terminal lift-dip sequence; Hoyt N. Duggan, who assumed that this vowel had been lost in the dialects of most Middle English alliterative poems, held that the poets wrote masculine and feminine line-endings in free variation. Subsequent studies accordingly set out to test and hone understandings of the grammar of weak final *-e*. This was probably the correct path of inquiry, at least in application to the poems at the center of the debate. After a period in which debate generated more heat than light, Cable's position on final *-e* received powerful confirmation — and some modification — in studies by Ad Putter, Judith Jefferson, and Myra Stokes and simultaneously by Nicolay Yakovlev.<sup>5</sup> The trochaic close is now a generally accepted feature of this meter, as seen, for instance, in Geoffrey Russom's recent monograph.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, inquiry has yielded intriguing new observations, especially with regard to the vocalic quality of the final dip.<sup>7</sup> As Cable would say, progress was made.

Progress was also made in understandings of the meter of *Piers Plowman*. In *English Alliterative Tradition*, Cable warns that *Piers Plowman* is a special case, requiring modification of metrical principle.<sup>8</sup> Langland's metrical practice is anomalous. Yet, as Cable affirms in another early study, "the norms

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<sup>3</sup>Cable, *English Alliterative Tradition*, 68–69.

<sup>4</sup>See Harold C. Zimmerman, "Continuity and Innovation: Scholarship on the Middle English Alliterative Revival," *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik* 35 (2003): 107–23, at 119–21, with references.

<sup>5</sup>Ad Putter, Judith Jefferson, and Myra Stokes, *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse* (Oxford, 2007); Nicolay Yakovlev, "The Development of Alliterative Metre from Old to Middle English" (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 2008), chap. 2, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:02e46bb4-0abb-479d-9c50-64be689e013e>; Nicolay Yakovlev, "On Final *-e* in the b-Verses of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Approaches to the Metres of Alliterative Verse*, ed. Judith Jefferson and Ad Putter (Leeds, 2009), 135–57.

<sup>6</sup>Geoffrey Russom, *The Evolution of Verse Structure in Old and Middle English Poetry. From the Earliest Alliterative Poems to Iambic Pentameter* (Cambridge, 2017); see too Eric Weiskott, *English Alliterative Verse: Poetic Tradition and Literary History* (Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>7</sup>Nicolay Yakovlev, "Prosodic Restrictions on the Short Dip in Late Middle English Alliterative Verse," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 23 (2009): 217–42, doi:[10.1484/J.YLS.1.100477](https://doi.org/10.1484/J.YLS.1.100477); Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes, *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse*, 25, 103; Thomas Cable, "Progress in Middle English Alliterative Metrics," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 23 (2009): 243–64, at 244–49, doi:[10.1484/J.YLS.1.100478](https://doi.org/10.1484/J.YLS.1.100478).

<sup>8</sup>Cable, *English Alliterative Tradition*, 68; see too Hoyt N. Duggan, "Notes on the Metre of *Piers Plowman*: Twenty Years On," in *Approaches to the Metres of Alliterative Verse*, ed. Judith Jefferson and Ad Putter (Leeds, 2009), 159–86.

of the tradition make the best point of departure even for Langland.”<sup>9</sup> This judgment is borne out in studies by Stephen A. Barney, Putter, John Burrow, and Eric Weiskott.<sup>10</sup> Each of these scholars demonstrates that Langland avoids masculine endings, as Cable would predict. A corollary is that *Piers Plowman* retains historical weak final *-e*, but this had been inferred already before the metrical tests.<sup>11</sup> Everyone who has studied the line-ending words in *Piers Plowman* recognizes that there are masculine endings, yet everyone agrees the masculine endings are a small residue, as they are also in other fourteenth-century English alliterative poems.

In scholarship on the prosody of *Piers Plowman*, the live question is not the difference between zero and one, but between one and two — that is, the acceptability or not of a long dip at the end of the line. The word *trinite* supplies an example: Joseph S. Wittig’s *Concordance* shows that this word occurs nineteen times in the Athlone edition of *Piers Plowman B*.<sup>12</sup> Of these nineteen instances, ten are at the end of the a-verse and three are in non-terminal positions in the b-verse. In these positions the word is prosodically unexceptional. The remaining six instances are at the end of the b-verse, where the word is very hard to reconcile to prosodic norms. The word *trinite* might bear stress on the initial syllable, final syllable, or both. The only scansion that is not possible is the one that would yield a regular trochaic line-ending.

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<sup>9</sup>Thomas Cable, “Middle English Meter and Its Theoretical Implications,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 2 (1988): 47–69, at 54, doi:[10.1484/J.YLS.2.302951](https://doi.org/10.1484/J.YLS.2.302951).

<sup>10</sup>Stephen A. Barney, “Langland’s Prosody: The State of the Study,” in *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff*, ed. M. Teresa Tavormina and R. F. Yeager (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1995), 65–85, at 82–85; Ad Putter, “Metre and the Editing of Middle English Verse: Prospects for Tail-Rhyme Romance, Alliterative Poetry, and Chaucer,” *Poetica* (Tokyo) 71 (2008): 29–47, at 34–35; Stephen A. Barney, “A Revised Edition of the C Text,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 23 (2009): 265–88, at 279–81, doi:[10.1484/J.YLS.1.100479](https://doi.org/10.1484/J.YLS.1.100479); J. A. Burrow, “The Endings of Lines in *Piers Plowman B*,” *Notes and Queries* 59 (2012): 316–20, doi:[10.1093/notesj/gjs065](https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjs065); Eric Weiskott, “*Piers Plowman* and the Durable Alliterative Tradition,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 30 (2016): 123–73, doi:[10.1484/J.YLS.5.111397](https://doi.org/10.1484/J.YLS.5.111397).

<sup>11</sup>M. L. Samuels, “Dialect and Grammar,” in *A Companion to “Piers Plowman”*, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley, 1988), 201–21, at 215–16; Hoyt N. Duggan, “Langland’s Dialect and Final *-e*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990): 157–91. Weiskott argues that this syllable is metrically facultative in *Piers Plowman*. See Weiskott, “*Piers Plowman* and the Durable,” 136–37, and, for counter-argument, Ian Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter* (Cambridge, 2017), 128.

<sup>12</sup>Joseph S. Wittig, *Piers Plowman: Concordance. A Lemmatized Analysis of the English Vocabulary of the A, B, and C Versions as Presented in the Athlone Editions, with Supplementary Concordances of the Latin and French Macaronics* (London, 2001). The Athlone edition is George Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version. Will’s Visions of Piers Plowman and Do-Well. An Edition in the Form of Trinity College Cambridge MS R.3.14 Corrected from Other Manuscripts, with Variant Readings*, rev. ed. (London and Berkeley, 1988); George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version. Will’s Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best. An Edition in the Form of Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17, Corrected and Restored from the Known Evidence, with Variant Readings*, rev. ed. (London and Berkeley, 1988); George Russell and George Kane, eds., *Piers Plowman: The C Version. Will’s Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best. An Edition in the Form of Huntington Library MS HM 143, Corrected and Restored from the Known Evidence, with Variant Readings* (London and Berkeley, 1997). I refer as well to John A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B-Version Archetype (Bx)*, XML version 2.0 (Raleigh, NC, 2018) and the 2014 on-line edition, available at <https://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Bx>. References to line numbers in Kane and Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: B Version* are identified with the prefix “KD”: for instance, “KD 6.67.” References to line numbers in Burrow and Turville-Petre, *B-Version Archetype* are identified with the prefix “Bx.” With regard to the prosody of *trinite*, there is no difference between these two editions of the B version; they print this word in the same nineteen lines and in the same positions within those lines.

## 2 The state of study

The problem of long final dips in *Piers Plowman* has been recognized in previous studies and received several treatments. In “Middle English Meter and its Theoretical Implications,” Cable supplies two examples of lines with a long final dip in the Athlone edition of *Piers Plowman* B, *passus* 6.<sup>13</sup> I record the position of metrical stresses with acute accents and record scansion in square brackets to the right (S = a metrical stress; x = an unstressed syllable).

1. máugree whoso bigrúcceþ it (KD 6.67b) [SxxxxSxx]
2. [to wédyngē] and [mówyngē] (KD 6.189b) [xSxxxSxx]

In (1) a long dip would seem to be formed by a verbal inflection and the following pronoun; in (2) the culprit is the disyllabic suffix of a gerund. Cable’s attention was drawn to this pair of lines by the existence of metrical variants, yet, perhaps more so than Cable recognized, the lines illustrate textual difficulties that may confound metrical analysis of this poem. Item (2) is a C-version reading, intruded into the text of *Piers Plowman* B by the Athlone editors, George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, evidently because they were unhappy with the alliterative pattern transmitted in manuscript copies of the B version.<sup>14</sup> The near-unanimous reading of B-version copies is “with spades and with schoueles,” a perfectly regular b-verse.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, (1) has good support in manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* B and surely represents the original reading of the beta family of copies.<sup>16</sup> The most interesting dissent comes from the alpha family, where one copy — Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson Poetry 38 (sigil R) — transmits a variant word order, with the pronoun *it* preceding the verb: “máugre ho-so it be-grúcce” [SxxxxxSx]. R is a carefully produced copy very near the B-version archetype; its reading in this case is supported by most A-version copies and could be the original reading of B. If it were, then the redactor of Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 201 (sigil F) deleted the pronoun, perhaps motivated to reduce an extra-long dip, while the copyist of the beta hyparchetype revised towards prose word order. The alternative scenario of textual transmission, favored by Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre in their edition of the B-version archetype (Bx), is that “maugre who-so bigruccheth it” is the original reading and the readings of R, F, and some beta copies show efforts by scribes to correct a line that they perceived as irregular: “Scribes,” Burrow and Turville-Petre write, “may have been uncomfortable with two unstressed syllables at line-end.”<sup>17</sup> As if the textual uncertainties were not enough, the line also poses a properly linguistic question. In southern dialects of Middle English, the inflection of the third-person singular present indicative could syncopate, thereby reducing the final dip to the expected, monosyllabic dimension. This option is invoked by Barney and Weiskott in analysis of similarly structured b-verses elsewhere in *Piers Plowman*.

If you are still reading, you will sense how far we have fallen from Cable’s elegant demonstrations regarding *Cleanness*. Opinion on final dips in *Piers Plowman* has been split. Barney and Weiskott argue

<sup>13</sup>Cable, “Middle English Meter,” 61.

<sup>14</sup>See Kane and Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: B Version*, 152.

<sup>15</sup>Graphic sequences in *-ele-* and *-ere-* routinely syncopate. I quote manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* B from Hoyt N. Duggan, gen. ed., *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, Vols 1–8 (2000–2014; web edition, The Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts, 2014), <http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/>.

<sup>16</sup>For the designation of “alpha” and “beta” families of copies, see Burrow and Turville-Petre, *B-Version Archetype*, 3–6, and references there.

<sup>17</sup>Burrow and Turville-Petre, *B-Version Archetype*, note to Bx 6.69.



that *prima facie* instances of long final dips are reconcilable to the normal trochaic pattern.<sup>18</sup> In a brief study limited to the B-version Prologue, Yakovlev likewise proposes metrically regular interpretations for ambiguous line-ending material.<sup>19</sup> The opposite view is represented principally by Duggan, who describes long final dips as a robust metrical irregularity in *Piers Plowman*.<sup>20</sup> Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes concur, as does Nicholas Myklebust in an unpublished paper.<sup>21</sup>

I think none of the treatments published to date is adequate. Though perhaps nearest the truth, the statements of Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes are offered as *obiter dicta*. Duggan's treatment is substantial, but his examples are not well chosen. Several of Duggan's scansiones are unjustifiably beholden to spellings; he is ably answered by Barney's general caveat that

a particular scribe's spelling at a particular place need not and does not represent pronunciation in a phonetic matter, certainly not Langland's, and Langland himself need not have spelled in such a way as to indicate his regular syllabification.<sup>22</sup>

Other of Duggan's examples, including *chapitle* 'chapter' (< OF), are only unmetrical if scanned with English initial stress. Moreover, the list of line-terminal polysyllables collected by Kane and Donaldson is misconstrued by Duggan and does not support his case.<sup>23</sup> The lifts that Kane and Donaldson assigned to the initial syllables of KD 3.240 *vsurie*, KD 4.32 *coueitise*, KD 4.178 *deserved*, KD 5.436 *vitailles*, KD 5.526 *sepulcre* and thirteen other words mark what the editors take to be penultimate lifts, so scanned because they alliterate. Several of the scansiones are dubious, unduly committed to preserving *aa/ax* alliteration, but in no case do they imply a long final dip. The verse "þei loued coueitise" (KD 4.32b), for example, scans either xxxSxSx (with double stress on *coueitise*) or xSxxxSx (with stress on *loued* and Romance accentuation of *coueitise*). Kane and Donaldson favored the first of these options, because the a-verse alliterates on /k/. In either scansion, a trochaic ending is assured. The most interesting examples in Kane and Donaldson's list are the Latin proparoxytones *iusticie* and *temperancie*, which occur repeatedly at line-end late in the poem. These words should bear a stress on the syllable that bore primary word-stress in Classical Latin, as *iustície* and *temperáncie*, yet they probably do not supply examples of line-terminal long dips, for unstressed short *i* followed by another vowel may be realized as the semiconsonantal glide *\j\*. Short *i* before another vowel could already be contracted in Roman poetry; medieval Latin poetry shows that synizesis was frequent in this context.<sup>24</sup> In summary, many line-terminal polysyllabic words may bear stress on the penultimate syllable (e.g., *pilgrymage*); others may lose a syllable through syncopation or slurring (e.g., *robbedest*). If Duggan's general position holds, it must be supported with other evidence.

<sup>18</sup>Barney, "A Revised Edition of the C Text," 280–81; Weiskott, "*Piers Plowman* and the Durable," 135–45 *passim*.

<sup>19</sup>Yakovlev, "Prosodic Restrictions," 237–38.

<sup>20</sup>Duggan, "Notes on the Metre," 170–72.

<sup>21</sup>Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes, *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse*, 25n28, 103n74; Putter, "Metre and the Editing of Middle English Verse," 43; Nicholas Myklebust, "*Ars longa: Piers Plowman* and the Problem of the Line-Final Dip" (Conference paper, Miami, FL, April 6, 2019). I thank Myklebust for sharing his conclusions with me in advance of publication.

<sup>22</sup>Barney, "A Revised Edition of the C Text," 280; compare Duggan, "Langland's Dialect and Final -e," 187–89, affirming that operative syllabifications might not be represented in scribal spellings.

<sup>23</sup>See Kane and Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: B Version*, 139n43.

<sup>24</sup>Peter Stotz, *Handbuch zur lateinischen Sprache des Mittelalters*. Vol 3: *Lautlehre* (Munich, 1996), 43–45; Dag Norberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Medieval Latin Versification*, ed. Jan Ziolkowski, trans. Grant C. Roti and Jacqueline de La Chapelle Skubly (Washington, D. C., 2004), 23–24.

Turning now to the other camp — that is, principally, Barney and Weiskott — I find that I admire the treatment of individual instances while harboring doubts about the general way of proceeding. The general procedure is to identify *prima facie* irregularities within a representative sample of lines, then progressively reduce the offending instances by reinterpretation, much as I have done earlier in this essay. The reinterpretations are often good, yet I miss a framework of interpretative controls of the kind Cable imposed on his study of *Cleanness*. Are there morphosyllabic sequences — that is, words, their constituents, and forms of them — that occur in *Piers Plowman* and would contribute a long dip at line-end, were they to appear in that location, but never do appear there?<sup>25</sup> The existence of a prosodic constraint should be visible as a differential distribution of linguistic material. Previous studies have demonstrated that Langland avoids placing stressed monosyllables at line-end, but no comparable demonstration has been attempted for words that would yield a long final dip. This is a first reservation.

Second, I suspect that the procedure of Barney and Weiskott (and the current author, in some previous work) may attribute too much authority to the accentual contour, as represented in scansion. We should perhaps give more attention to the elementary units of composition — morphosyllabic sequences — and treat the accentual contours as the result of certain ways of arranging linguistic material within a verse line. The location of word boundaries may be important.

Finally, I note that neither Barney nor Weiskott addresses Langland's evident deviations from Yakovlev's "schwa rule," that is, the requirement that non-initial short dips in the b-verse have, as their syllabic nucleus, the reduced neutral vowel schwa or word-final short /i/.<sup>26</sup> The equivalent rule, as formulated by Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes, is that a syllable contributing a non-initial short dip in the b-verse must not bear secondary stress. So stated, the schwa rule may seem a piece of stylistic finesse and Langland's nonobservance of it might be dismissed as unimportant. Yet, Cable, Yakovlev, and Weiskott seem to agree that the schwa rule is a vital feature of the Middle English alliterative meter. Cable hails the schwa rule as a contribution that assures Yakovlev's 2008 doctoral thesis "a permanent place in the bibliographies."<sup>27</sup> In *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse* I proposed that Yakovlev's schwa rule operates in the meter as the principle that regulates the syllabic count of dips and limits the b-verse to exactly one long dip.<sup>28</sup> That is, the schwa rule seems to play a role in the generation of the usual b-verse accentual contours. I extend that argument in the present essay and seek to demonstrate some consequences of Langland's nonobservance of the schwa rule.

In summary, an adequate account of line endings in *Piers Plowman* must look for absent patterns, pay attention to the morphosyllabic constituents of verse lines, and use the fullest description of Middle English alliterative meter available. Before turning back to *Piers Plowman*, I elaborate what I mean by "the fullest description available."

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<sup>25</sup>For "morphosyllabic sequence" see Yakovlev, "The Development of Alliterative Metre", *passim*. The term recognizes the prosodic significance of morphological class membership (for instance, the roots and inflections of nouns have different prosodic properties) and of syllable count (for instance, the meter may accept a monosyllabic stem morpheme at a point where a disyllabic stem morpheme would be metrically irregular).

<sup>26</sup>See n7, above.

<sup>27</sup>Cable, "Progress in Middle English," 246.

<sup>28</sup>Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 121–22.

### 3 Metrical theory: accentual contours, vocalic qualities, and word boundaries

Cable's and Duggan's breakthrough discovery of the mid-1980s was that the b-verses of Middle English alliterative poems conform to a small set of accentual contours, or patterned arrangements of lifts and dips. The contours may be described as the outcome of a small set of prosodic constraints. Cable and Duggan agreed on two principal constraints:

1. **The two lift rule.** Each well-formed b-verse has exactly two lifts or metrical stresses. ("Stress" must be defined elsewhere in the metrical theory, as Cable and Duggan did.)
2. **The long dip rule.** Each well-formed b-verse has exactly one long dip, that is, a string of two or more unstressed or weakly stressed syllables. This requirement must be met before a linear parsing of the verse reaches the second of the two lifts. A corollary is that a dip that follows the second and final lift must not be long.

A third constraint, disputed by Duggan, is the topic with which I began this essay:

3. **The terminal dip rule.** Each well-formed b-verse ends with a single unstressed syllable. Ends of lines are feminine, not masculine. The second lift and final dip together form a trochaic terminal cadence.

As Cable and Duggan recognized, the allowable configurations of stressed and unstressed syllables may be represented with standard notations of verse scansion. Cable's version of the rules yields two basic contours. Here "x..x" represents a long dip; "(x)" represents an optional short dip:

(x)Sx..xSx  
x..xS(x)Sx

In subsequent scholarship these two accentual contours, so written, are sometimes termed the Cable-Duggan b-verse patterns. Their fame is well deserved, yet they are partial representations; some of the omitted information may be important to the meter.

Yakovlev's contribution is to observe that the meter distinguishes between two types of unstressed syllable:

4. **The schwa rule.** Non-initial short dips have as their syllabic nucleus the neutral unstressable vowel schwa /ə/. Word-final short /i/ is also permissible.

To represent the schwa rule in the above scansions, we would need to replace certain "x's" with another symbol, perhaps "ə":

(x)Sx..xSə  
x..xS(ə)Sə

In this second version of the notation, the "ə's" register an additional constraint on the constituents of non-initial short dips.

Word boundaries are introduced into consideration by my reference, above, to "word-final short /i/," yet here again the initial formulation is not very promising, for it seems to place word boundaries far down in a branching hierarchy of constraints. In fact, word division is highly regular and should



be part of the surface representation. Data collected by Yakovlev show that the final dip is never an independent word.<sup>29</sup> Often it is an inflectional syllable. When not an inflectional syllable, it is usually the reduced second element of a disyllabic stem. Likewise, the syllable forming a short medial dip groups with the preceding stress; exceptions, where this dip is formed of an independent word or a prefix, may be authentic but they are very rare.<sup>30</sup>

Revising the notation again, I now employ “=” for a forbidden word division. The contour with a long medial dip may be written thus:

(x)Sx..xS=ə

A word boundary is not permitted after the final lift in the b-verse. This morphosyllabic structure justifies the treatment of the terminal cadence as a single abstract unit of prosody, a word-foot of trochaic shape. Hence my preference, in the opening paragraphs of this essay, for the term “trochaic constituent,” a term that I borrow from Geoffrey Russom.<sup>31</sup>

The schwa rule shores up the trochaic contour, for it has two phonological implications:

1. The schwa-nucleated syllable cannot be followed by another unstressed syllable within the same word. A long final dip is ruled out.
2. Stress cannot be shifted onto the schwa-nucleated syllable, for schwa is never stressed. A masculine ending is ruled out.

Implication (1) may allow us to restate and simplify the rules governing dips: each b-verse must have one long dip; after the long-dip requirement is met, subsequent dips may contain no vowels other than schwa (or word-final short /i/). Such dips are necessarily short. Implication (2) is the target of Cable’s reformulation of the schwa rule in “Progress in Middle English Alliterative Metrics”: in that essay, Cable observes that “any syllable that could be shifted to rhyming position in Chaucer or Gower could not occur at the end of the long line in Middle English alliterative metre.”<sup>32</sup> Cable’s claim is not that alliterative poets deliberately differentiated their practice from end-rhymed meters, but that alliterative and rhyming meters exploited a phonological property in complementary and opposing ways. A syllable with a non-schwa vowel or secondary stress is a site with “*potential* for stress shift.”<sup>33</sup> Rhyming poets took advantage of this potential, so as to use the words in rhyming position. Alliterative poets avoided the same set of words at line-end, so as to end the line with an unambiguous cadence. (The ambiguity does not pertain in rhyming poems because segmental phonology — rhyme — marks the position of the final metrical stress.) For alliterative poets, the schwa rule maximizes the clarity of metrical structure at the end of the verse line, in keeping with the principle of closure.<sup>34</sup>

Compare now the b-verse pattern with a short medial dip (I employ “#” for a mandatory word division):

x..xS=ə#S=ə

<sup>29</sup>Yakovlev, “Prosodic Restrictions,” 227, reporting ten exceptions in a corpus of 19,326 lines.

<sup>30</sup>Yakovlev, “Prosodic Restrictions,” 232–35.

<sup>31</sup>Russom, “The Evolution of Middle English Alliterative Meter,” 279.

<sup>32</sup>Cable, “Progress in Middle English,” 259.

<sup>33</sup>Cable, “Progress in Middle English,” 260, emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup>The “principle of closure” is the observation that poetic meters tend to be strictest at the end of verse units. An example is the ending of Latin dactylic hexameter (long-short-short-long-anceps). See Russom, *The Evolution of Verse Structure in Old and Middle English Poetry*, 17, 39; and Cable, “Progress in Middle English,” 257n15.

A short medial dip groups with the preceding stress, just as the short final dip does. The principal exceptions are verses with compound stress, where both b-verse stresses are supplied by a single word. In those cases, which are rare, the short medial dip is supplied by an inter-tonic syllable. Whenever the b-verse stresses are supplied by different words and they are separated by a short dip, the short dip is contributed by the word that supplies the previous stress. A corollary is that whenever the word that contributes the final lift has a pretonic syllable (a verbal prefix, for example), this pretonic syllable contributes to a long medial dip. The short medial dip is (almost) never formed from a prefix. The result is a further sharpening of the trochaic constituent. Middle English poets sometimes alliterate on the prefix of a verb, rather than the onset of its root syllable, and this practice suggests that the poets treated stress as shiftable onto those alliterating prefixes.<sup>35</sup> By excluding prefixes from a short medial dip, the poets leave no doubt which syllable bears stress. The whole metrical structure seems to be devised to maximize clarity.

This metrical structure is observed in most fourteenth-century English alliterative poems. *Piers Plowman* is different. In *Piers Plowman* the short medial dip may be formed from a verbal prefix, an independent word, or a syllable with secondary stress.<sup>36</sup> The last category is not always distinguishable from verses with two long dips, for the syllable with secondary stress often belongs to a word or form that is entitled to historical or inflectional *-e*. The final dip exhibits the same classes of divergence, while nevertheless showing that Langland knew the metrical constraints of his form. Indeed, he sometimes shows deference to the constraints even as he breaks them.

## 4 Scansion of *Piers Plowman*

### 4.1 Word boundaries after the final lift

In the text of the *B-Version Archetype* edited by Burrow and Turville-Petre, I find 103 lines with a word division after the final lift in the line. There are four syntactic frames:

- a stress-bearing verb or verbal is followed by a personal pronoun (V#pron), for instance, “Haue mercye in þi mynde · and with þi mouth biseche it” (Bx 5.291)
- a stress-bearing verb or verbal is followed by a simple adverb or postposed preposition (V#prep), for instance, “Þan ihesu or ihesus · þat al owre ioye come of” (Bx 19.25)<sup>37</sup>
- a stress-bearing preposition is followed by a personal pronoun (PREP#pron), for instance: “And lay on hym þus with loue · til he laghe on þe” (Bx 13.155)
- a stress-bearing noun is followed by a monosyllabic form of ‘to be’ (V#be), for instance: “Þat 3e han silke and sendal · to sowe whan tyme is” (Bx 6.11)

The 103 instances represent about 1.5% of eligible lines. (By “eligible lines” I mean those that end in English; of 7,566 lines in Bx, 470 are wholly Latin or end in Latin.) This rate of incidence illustrates well the prosodic distinctiveness of *Piers Plowman*, for such word divisions occur at line-end fewer than a dozen times in Yakovlev’s corpus of 19,326 lines. Yet an internal comparison — that is, comparison of

<sup>35</sup>Hoyt N. Duggan, “Stress Assignment in Middle English Alliterative Poetry,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 89 (1990): 309–29.

<sup>36</sup>Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 126–29.

<sup>37</sup>See, for this construction, Tauno F. Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax. Part I: Parts of Speech* (Helsinki, 1960), 189, 346.

a-verses and b-verses of *Piers Plowman* — shows that line-ending constraints have not been discarded. Table 1 summarizes the distributions.

Table 1: Distributions of syntactic frames that place a word division after the final lift.

syntactic frame	a-verse	b-verse
V#pron	136	73
V#prep	29	5
PREP#pron	92	22
N# <i>be</i>	48	3
TOTAL	305	103

The syntactic frame V#pron, which contributes the largest proportion of irregular word divisions at line-end, occurs before the caesura about twice as often as at line-end. The syntactic frames V#prep and PREP#pron are four or five times more frequent before the caesura than at line-end. The ratio is greater still in the case of N#*be*. Overall, the syntactic frames that place a word division after the final lift in the b-verse occur about three times more often at the end of the a-verse. These gross distributions are, however, at best a provocation to further inquiry. As a first step towards uncovering deeper asymmetries, I offer some explanatory comment on my method of counting:

1. My count of the syntactic frame V#pron does not include instances of speech tags consisting of *quod* followed by a personal pronoun. These speech tags occur routinely before the caesura, in which position they are often extrametrical.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, a speech tag with *quod* occurs only once at line-end in Bx — surely an archetypal error (Bx 8.78).
2. I produce counts only for syntactic frames that yield an irregular word division in the b-verse. Omitted from the data in Table 1 are variant syntactic frames that occur at the end of the a-verse, but never at the end of the b-verse. For instance, beside the 48 instances of N#*be* before the caesura, there are an additional 42 instances in which a monosyllabic form of *be* is preceded by a stress-bearing adjective, adverb, verb, or verbal before the caesura. These sequences never occur at the end of the b-verse in Bx.
3. Verse-final *nought* (adv.) is excluded from Table 1 as prosodically ambiguous, capable of supplying either a lift or (part of) a final dip. This negative adverb occurs in Bx only twice at line-end (Bx 11.85, Bx 13.293), against 51 instances before the caesura.
4. More generally, comparison of a-verse and b-verse is complicated by the fact that monosyllabic function words may receive metrical stress when in terminal position in the a-verse. Monosyllabic forms of *be* and the personal pronouns *I*, *he* (masc. and fem.), and *hem* supply the final lift of the a-verse in a few instances.<sup>39</sup> They may do so in other instances, as may postposed

<sup>38</sup>W. W. Skeat, “An Essay on Alliterative Poetry,” in *Bishop Percy’s Folio Manuscript: Ballads and Romances*, ed. John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall (London, 1868), 3:xi–xxxix, at xxxv–xxxvi, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006727654>; Eric Weiskott, “The End of the Line? Alliterative Meter, Macaronic Style, and *Piers Plowman*,” *Studies in Philology* 117 (2020): 225–39, at 235, doi:10.1353/sip.2020.0007.

<sup>39</sup>The final lift in the a-verse may be supplied by *was* (Bx 2.18, Bx 13.380, Bx 19.209), *be(n)* (Bx 4.109, Bx 5.131, Bx 14.125, Bx 19.182, Bx 19.183), *I* (Bx 5.104, Bx 5.119), *me* (Bx 13.393), *he* (Bx 7.76, Bx 10.411, Bx 13.309, Bx 19.58, Bx 20.198, Bx 20.301), *we* (Bx 18.170), and *hem* (Bx 13.368, Bx 19.109, Bx 20.61). Line references are illustrative only. See

prepositions and simple adverbs pertaining to a phrasal verb.<sup>40</sup>

Taken together, these remarks mean that summary counts understate the difference between a-verse and b-verse. As the principle of closure would predict, the end of the a-verse accommodates linguistic material that never appears at the end of the b-verse. The end of the a-verse also allows greater flexibility in prosodic interpretation of material that appears in both locations, and the a-verse is the preferential location for the most difficult variants of the basic syntactic frames. This last point may be demonstrated by a closer look at the most numerous pattern, V#pron.

#### 4.1.1 V#pron

The prosody of the syntactic frame V#pron varies — not all realizations are prosodically equal — and the most difficult realizations tend to be placed before the caesura, not at line-end. Where V#pron occurs at line-end, the verb is relatively more likely to be without inflection.<sup>41</sup> Where the verb is entitled to an inflectional syllable, the inflection is usually elidable at line-end, whereas it is usually not elidable before the caesura.<sup>42</sup> At line-end the verb always has a monosyllabic stem (it may also have an unstressed prefix). In pre-caesural position the syntactic frame accommodates verbs with di- and trisyllabic stems.<sup>43</sup> Word division remains irregular in all cases, but Langland has taken evident care to confine irreducible long dips to the end of the a-verse.<sup>44</sup>

Prosodic differentiation probably extends even further, to the quality of the vowel in the final dip. Where the syntactic frame V#pron occurs at line-end, the terminal pronoun is often *it* (43 of 73 instances). At the end of the a-verse, the other monosyllabic personal pronouns are much more frequent, while *it* accounts for only 27 of 136 instances. This asymmetrical distribution is probably motivated by prosody, for I see no expository factors that should favor *it* as pronominal object at line-end. As I have noted already, several of the other personal pronouns occasionally take metrical stress in *Piers Plowman*. *It* was probably weaker than those other pronouns and favored at line-end because not a candidate for stress. In each of these details of construction, we see Langland mitigating the difficulty introduced by irregular word division and composing untypical b-verses that may nevertheless be reconciled to the expected accentual contours of alliterative verse, much as Barney and Weiskott have maintained. Incidentally, the prosodic mitigations also argue for the authenticity of V#pron at line-end. Although certain instances of line-ending V#pron may result from scribal interference with authorial SOV word order, a scribal preference for SVO word order is not likely to generate the subtler patterns of a-verse/b-verse asymmetry observed in this section.

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also Samuels, “Dialect and Grammar,” 209.

<sup>40</sup>Yakovlev, “The Development of Alliterative Metre,” 164; Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 119–20.

<sup>41</sup>Of 73 instances of V#pron at the end of the b-verse, I find nine strong preterites of first- or third-person singular indicative and six other verbs or verbals with zero or nonsyllabic inflection. Of 136 instances of V#pron at the end of the a-verse, I find just two strong preterites and three other verbs or verbals with zero or nonsyllabic inflection.

<sup>42</sup>At line-end, the verb or verbal in the syntactic frame V#pron is entitled to an inflectional syllable in 58 cases, of which 50 are elidable. (By “elidable” I mean that the verbal inflection is *-e* or *-en*, the latter of which may be reduced to *-e*, and the following word begins with a vowel or soft *h*.) In pre-caesural position, inflections are elidable in only 59 of 131 cases.

<sup>43</sup>The forms are *amaistriēn*, *amercy*, *baptised*, *conforted*, *conseille*, *coueiten*, *folwyng*, *manaced*, *meynprise*, *merueilled*, *punyschen*, *pursue*, *recorden*, *reuerenced*, and *worshipe*. Alliteration usually implies that the initial syllable bears stress. (Prefixed *a-* is unstressed.)

<sup>44</sup>Exceptions, where an unelidable inflection and personal pronoun form a long dip at line-end, are Bx 5.425, Bx 6.69, Bx 6.90, Bx 14.23, Bx 15.333, Bx 16.140, Bx 19.23, and Bx 19.181. In several cases the long dip could be reduced by electing a syncopated form of the verb: for instance, *han* for *hauen*.

### 4.1.2 Other frames

Compensatory patterns may also be observed in the other syntactic frames. At line-end, prepositions in the syntactic frame PREP#pron are either monosyllabic or disyllabic bearing stress on the second syllable (*upon*, *once*). The sole exception is “And han clerkes to kepen vs þer-Inne · and hem þat shal come after vs” (Bx 15.610). In pre-caesural position *after* occurs six times. One also finds *azeines*, *amonges*, *byfore*, *byhynde*, *tofore*, and *vnder* — prepositions that should bear stress on their penultimate syllable and form a long dip in combination with the following pronoun.

Regarding the syntactic frame V#prep, one may note that the verb is a strong preterite singular, without inflection, in three of the five line-ending instances, as against one of 29 pre-caesural instances. The inflectionless verbs yield trochaic endings in combination with the postposition; they show Langland’s deference to prosodic convention, even as he composes verses with irregular word divisions.

## 4.2 Single lexemes

Regarding morphosyllabic sequences without a word boundary, I can do no better than analyze some prominent exemplary cases: *-ly* adverbs, compounds in *-man*, compounds in *-nesse*, nouns in *-(i)oun*, and gerunds (a subset of *-inge* nouns). Each of these sequences is avoided at the ends of lines in the Middle English alliterative poems that supplied the principal corpus for Cable, Duggan, Yakovlev, and Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes. Adverbial *-ly* and the elements *-man* and *-(i)oun* each contain a non-schwa vowel, capable of taking stress in rhymed Middle English verse. When placed at the end of a line in *Piers Plowman*, these elements introduce prosodic ambiguity as violations of the schwa rule. In the case of the suffixes *-inge* and *-nesse*, a non-schwa vowel is followed, at least optionally, by analogical weak *-e*.<sup>45</sup> When these suffixes appear at line-end, three scansiones are possible: the disyllabic suffix may form a long dip; the suffix may be reduced to a single non-schwa syllable by apocope of *-e*; or stress may shift onto the suffix itself, yielding a regular ending.<sup>46</sup> In the rare cases in which the suffixes *-inge* and *-nesse* occur at line-end in other fourteenth-century alliterative poems, the verses are constructed in such a way as to guide readers towards a metrically regular scansion, with stress shift. Examples are *Cleanness* 1624b “holy connyng” and *Patience* 32b “& miry clannesse.”<sup>47</sup> To obtain the non-terminal long dip required by the meter, the final metrical stress in these two verses must be delayed and shifted to the suffixes; after the operation of stress shift, the only linguistic material left for the final dip is weak *-e* (omitted from the scribe’s spelling in *Cleanness* 1624). The poet of *Cleanness* and *Patience* thereby avoids the prosodic ambiguity endemic to *Piers Plowman*. With the exception of *-ly* adverbs, each of the sequences examined here appears dozens of times at line-end in *Piers Plowman*; yet, with the exception of the gerunds and the *-(i)oun* nouns, each appears more often before the caesura than at line-end. There is a lot of individual variation among lexical items and some of the variation surely responds to non-prosodic factors in the composition of the poem. Only the *-ly* adverbs have received study.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup>For analogical *-e* in the verbal noun, see Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes, *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse*, 241n71, and Burrow and Turville-Petre, *B-Version Archetype*, nn. to Bx P.67, Bx P.104. Burrow and Turville-Petre observe, on the basis of variant readings, that scribes did not necessarily attribute final *-e* to this ending in present participles.

<sup>46</sup>Yakovlev, “Prosodic Restrictions,” 238–39, evaluates these options.

<sup>47</sup>I transcribe from digital images of the unique manuscript, published online by the Cotton Nero A.x. Project at <https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/Browse/Collections/Gawain-Manuscript/>.

<sup>48</sup>Duggan, “Langland’s Dialect and Final *-e*,” 179–81.

My study of *-ly* adverbs is based on Bx, the same text that supplies my corpus for the previous section. For the remaining morphosyllabic sequences, I switch to the Athlone edition of the B version. The reason is that Wittig’s *Concordance* is too useful to ignore. I continue to cross-check the Athlone data against Bx, which I consult as a text file, queryable with regular expressions. These checks convince me that a study based wholly on Bx would yield the same conclusions. Examples are quoted from Bx throughout.

#### 4.2.1 *-ly* adverbs

Duggan reports a single line-ending *-ly* adverb in the A version of *Piers Plowman*, three in the B version, and nine in the C version.<sup>49</sup> My study, limited to Bx, concurs with Duggan’s findings. Adverbs in *-ly* occur four times at line-end in Bx.<sup>50</sup> By comparison, they occur about 100 times before the caesura, where they supply the final lift in the a-verse. Duggan interpreted the three or four instances of line-ending *-ly* adverbs in *Piers Plowman* B as an example of Langland’s divergence from the compositional practice other alliterative poets. Yet Langland’s handling of this morpheme appears unexceptional in comparison with the other sequences under examination in the present study. Indeed, Langland’s approximate conformity (4 exceptions in over 7,000 lines) requires explanation. In alliterative verse, *-ly* adverbs often have the function of metrical filler, as previous scholars have observed. These adverbs were perhaps not important enough to come under the influence of the discursive pressures that sometimes lead to metrically irregular use of the words to be discussed in the next sections.

#### 4.2.2 Compounds in *-man*

My study of compounds in *-man* is based on thirteen lexical items that appear a total of 116 times in the Athlone edition of *Piers Plowman* B.<sup>51</sup> Compounds in *-man* that appear five or more times in the poem appear at least once at line-end. Table 2 summarizes the distributions for lexical items that appear at least once at line-end; items that never appear at line-end are grouped together as “others.”<sup>52</sup>

Table 2: Counts and distributions of compounds in *-man*. The column labels ‘a-verse’ and ‘b-verse’ refer to the final position in those units.

item	total	a-verse	b-verse
<i>chapmen</i>	5	2	2
<i>kynnesman</i>	1	0	1
<i>lemman</i>	8	3	1
<i>plowman</i>	43	31	8
<i>werkman</i>	11	2	1

<sup>49</sup>See the previous note. Duggan’s texts are the Athlone edition of A and B and Derek Pearsall’s first edition of C.

<sup>50</sup>Bx 2.100, Bx 7.11, Bx 7.194, Bx 12.190. All four instances appear also in the Athlone B version; Duggan omitted Bx 7.194 (KD 7.184).

<sup>51</sup>Excluded from this count are the forms *lemmanes* (pl.) and *wommene* (gen. pl.) and the compound *no-man*. *Lemmanes* occurs once at line-end (Bx 15.137) and could be scanned as regular with stress shift. I omit *no-man* because Wittig analyzes this compound under its component parts. In Bx *no-man* appears once at line-end (Bx 5.449) and never in pre-caesural position.

<sup>52</sup>These are *bedeman*, *bondman*, *gleman*, *bakeneyman*, *lores-man*, *ragman*, and *shipmen*.



item	total	a-verse	b-verse
<i>womman</i>	30	10	6
others	18	11	0
TOTAL	116	59	19

A single item, *ploughman*, contributes about half of all instances of *-man* compounds in verse-final position and occurs before the caesura about four times as often as at line-end. Most instances are in the set phrase *Piers the ploughman*, where alliteration should favor placement in the a-verse. *Womman*, the next most frequent word in this class, is more evenly distributed within the line. Overall, *-man* compounds appear before the caesura about three times as often as at line-end. The distribution in Bx is essentially the same: 57 instances in pre-caesural position and 19 at line-end.

As often, the numerical data admit opposing interpretations. Do they show that Langland violated the schwa rule or that the vowel in *-man* was schwa in Langland's language? *Womman*, an obscured compound, might have a reduced vowel in its second syllable. Chaucer rhymes on this word, but Weiskott argues suggestively that Langland's language was more advanced than Chaucer's, employing a more colloquial register of contemporary English.<sup>53</sup> The argument deserves consideration, yet the pattern of distribution of *-man* compounds seems at least to imply deference to the traditional phonology, by favoring positions other than line-end for these words. To pursue this line of inquiry, one would want to compare the distribution of *-man* compounds with, for instance, nominal plurals in *-es*, or another sequence that certainly contained schwa. Pending such study, it seems preferable to accept the phonologies indicated by the usage of Chaucer and Gower, and of alliterative poets other than Langland, and treat the line-ending *-man* compounds as violations of the schwa rule. Support for that view comes from other morphosyllabic sequences that give non-schwa vowels or long dups at line-end.

### 4.2.3 Compounds in *-nesse*

I find 44 lexemes with the suffix *-nesse*. These appear 212 times in the Athlone edition of *Piers Plowman* B, of which 62 instances are before the caesura and 52 at line-end.<sup>54</sup> At first glance, this distribution appears quite different from that for *-man* compounds, and the divergence is in the direction opposite what might be predicted. Whereas line-ending compounds in *-man* violate only the schwa rule, the morpheme *-nes* acquired analogical final *-e* in Middle English; these compounds may be expected to form a long dip at line-end, unless stress is shifted to the suffix.

In fact, the summary distribution for *-nesse* nouns is skewed by *witnesse*, the most frequent lexical item in this class. *Witnesse* appears 45 times in the Athlone B version, of which 34 times are at line-end and just five are before the caesura. Line-ending position is strongly preferred for this noun, and we may begin to explain the anomaly by observing that most instances are contributed by a single formula, *N bereþ witnesse*. This formula puts *witnesse* at line-end 27 times. Most of the remaining instances of line-final *witnesse* are contributed by an equivalent formula, *take N to witnesse*. In these

<sup>53</sup>Weiskott, "Piers Plowman and the Durable," 152–53; and see M. L. Samuels, "Chaucerian Final '-e'," *Notes and Queries* 19 (1972): 445–48, doi:10.1093/nq/19.12.445, a crucial statement on linguistic register and literary language.

<sup>54</sup>In Bx the figures are again essentially the same: these forms appear 62 times before the caesura and 51 times at line-end.

formulaic usages, *witnesse* nearly always appears in final position.<sup>55</sup> The pragmatics of the *witnesse*-formulas seems to account for their location in the b-verse, for they routinely serve to introduce an authoritative statement at the beginning of the next line, often a Latin quotation or an English *That*-clause:

By godes body quod þis boke · I wil bere witnesse  
 Þat þo þis barne was ybore · þere blased a sterre (Bx 18.237–38)

In one instance, *witnesse* must have stress shift: “Ac for þe boke bible · bereth witnesse” (Bx 7.166). Stress shift is possible in other lines, though usually at the cost of opening a second long dip within the line, as in Bx 18.237. I do not find a way of determining the prosody of *witnesse* in such cases. More importantly, the general distributional data for *-nesse* nouns show that *witnesse* is anomalous in its class. This anomaly should be respected, for the *witnesse*-formulas seem to be an instance in which the expository logic of *Piers Plowman* comes into conflict with and overrides prosodic norms. When the two *witnesse*-formulas are excluded from the total counts, the frequency and distribution of the remaining instances of *witnesse* are brought into line with other *-nesse* nouns and the overall figures for this class of nouns show a preference for pre-caesural position, by a factor of 3 to 1. This is very near the ratio observed for *-man* compounds.

#### 4.2.4 Nouns in *-(i)oun*

I find 25 nouns in *-oun* or *-ioun* in *Piers Plowman* B. These appear 234 times in singular, non-genitive usage, of which 53 are before the caesura and 49 are at line-end. (I exclude plurals and genitives because these forms are prosodically unexceptional at line end, assuming syllabic *-es* inflection and Romance accentuation.) The most frequent word in this class is *resoun*, with 95 instances in the Athlone B version. Chaucer’s usage confirms that the second syllable is stressable, yet, in *Piers Plowman*, the word appears slightly more often at line-end than in pre-caesural position (25 and 20 instances, respectively). The next most frequent *-(i)oun* nouns are *pardoun* and *contricioun*, with 53 combined instances in the Athlone B version, of which 11 are before the caesura and just one at line-end — a distribution that suggests *resoun* is another lexical anomaly, like *witnesse*.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the second syllable of *resoun* was already reduced to schwa in Langland’s language; or perhaps the word was simply too important to be excluded from any position within the line. Rarer *-(i)oun* nouns have distributions intermediate between those of *resoun* and *pardoun*. Cable observes that *seson* is the type of word that should be excluded from line-ending position.<sup>57</sup> Of three instances in *Piers Plowman* B, two are at the end of a-verses (including the first verse of the poem). The third instance is line-final (Bx 13.368). Other *-(i)oun* nouns that appear at least once at line-end are *bacoun*, *baroun*, *confessioun*, *contemplacioun*, *fauoun*, *feloun*, *ymagynacioun*, *lessoun*, *passioun*, *porcioun*, *prison*, *religioun*, *ressurrexioun*, and *scorpioun*. These words join the compounds in *-man* and *-nesse* in showing Langland’s willingness to end lines with morphemes that were not used in that position by other fourteenth-century alliterative poets.

<sup>55</sup>Exceptions are “Wyser þan salamon was · bereth witnesse and tauzte” (Bx 11.283) and “Þei wil be wroth for I write þus · ac to witnesse I take / Bothe Mathew and Marke” (Bx 15.509–10a), where *witnesse* participates in the alliterative pattern.

<sup>56</sup>The line-ending instance is “For hym and for alle his · fonde I þat his pardoun / Miȝte lechen a man” (Bx 13.265–66a).

<sup>57</sup>Cable, “Progress in Middle English,” 259.

#### 4.2.5 Gerunds

In the B version I find 107 individual gerunds, with a total of 285 occurrences in the poem.<sup>58</sup> Several of the most frequent lexemes are avoided at line-end, as shown in Table 3, but distributional profiles vary. Notably, *lyuyng(e)* and *techyng(e)* are more frequent at line-end than before the caesura.

Table 3: Counts and distributions of gerunds (items with 10 or more occurrences). The column labels ‘a-verse’ and ‘b-verse’ refer to the final position in those units.

item	total	a-verse	b-verse
<i>biddyng(e)</i>	12	9	1
<i>knowyng(e)</i>	10	7	2
<i>konnyng(e)</i>	13	5	0
<i>lesyng(e)</i>	15	6	0
<i>likyng(e)</i>	20	6	2
<i>lyuyng(e)</i>	10	2	5
<i>techyng(e)</i>	16	1	12
TOTAL	96	36	22

Stress shift is again possible, but the 22 instances of line-final gerunds reported in Table 3 include no cases in which stress shift is required, as it is in the pair of lines from *Cleanness* and *Patience*, discussed earlier in this essay. In ten of the 22 cases, stress shift would open a second long dip within the line. Of particular interest are lines like “þorw her good lyuyng(e)” (Bx 15.440b) and “and a clene lyuyng(e)” (Bx 19.472b), which I would scan  $xxS\acute{a}\#Sx\grave{a}$  (without stress shift) or  $xxS\acute{a}\#xS\grave{a}$  (with stress shift). *Good* is entitled to inflectional *-e* in definite usage; the *-e* in *clene* is organic (< OE *clāne*). One might be tempted to postulate apocope of *-e* on these adjectives, then scan the verses  $xxS\#xS\grave{a}$  (with stress shift). That scansion yields the expected line-ending contour but also yields an irregular word division and a non-schwa vowel in a short medial dip. Alternatively, one could suppose that *-ing(e)* nouns retain stress on their root syllables and that the suffix was for Langland usually monosyllabic, without final *-e*. On that interpretation, line-ending instances of *-ing(e)* nouns place a non-schwa vowel in the final dip. I see no way of reconciling these verses with the patterns of usage shown in other fourteenth-century alliterative poems.

Omitted from Table 3 are 100 additional gerunds of lower frequency. The rarer gerunds appear 50 times in pre-caesural position and 59 times at line-end, neutralizing the slight preference for pre-caesural position shown in Table 3. In a few cases, involving verbs with disyllabic stems (*rekenyng(e)* and *visytyng(e)*), stress shift is necessary, for the verses otherwise lack a long dip. Most cases remain prosodically ambiguous. If the difference between distributions of high- and low-frequency gerunds is significant, an explanation should probably be sought in the semantic factors that drive lexical selection. When Langland was drawn to use a relatively uncommon word (or one uncommon within his poetic repertoire), he perhaps took more care to have the right meaning than he did for prosodic convention.

<sup>58</sup>I arbitrarily exclude present participles and *-inge* nouns other than gerunds.

## 5 Conclusion

Did Langland write lines with long final dips? The evidence for long final dips, as presented in this essay, consists in line-ending instances of the syntactic frame V#pron where the verb is entitled to an inflection that will not elide (8 instances); compounds in *-nesse* (52 instances, mostly *witnesse*); and the sequence *-inge* (81 instances in gerunds; an uncounted number of other *-inge* nouns and present participles). To these one may add line-ending instances of *trinite* (my initial example) and words sharing that prosodic shape, for instance, *charite* and *povertte*. Alternative scansion is possible in many cases, but I do not see a way of eliminating non-schwa vowels from Langland's final dips, and this is perhaps the more important finding. Once non-schwa vowels are admitted into a short dip, phonology permits the dip to be extended into a second syllable. Viewed from the perspective of Yakovlev's schwa rule, the allowability or not of long final dips in *Piers Plowman* is perhaps *une question mal posée*. What is clear is that Langland readily permitted non-schwa vowels and secondary stresses in the final dip; with that change, disyllabic final dips enter the picture as possible realizations of the meter.

The peculiar habits of composition seen in *Piers Plowman* B are already established in the A version. *Resoun*, *techyng*, *witnesse*, and *womman* — words evocative of central themes of the poem — all appear at line-end in *Piers Plowman* A. Although I have offered a demonstration only in the case of *witnesse*, I have suggested at several points in my argument that the use and distribution of words in *Piers Plowman* responds to discursive and semantic priorities that override metrical convention. I note in closing that this “expressive” interpretation of prosodic irregularity fits well, perhaps too well, with a common critical perception of *Piers Plowman*: the poet and his fictional avatar Wille can seem almost to burst with language, as if compelled to utterances that will not be constrained overmuch by matters of decorum, prosodic or otherwise. While I do not disown this perception, I note that it trades in representations contrived by the poet and I freely acknowledge that Myklebust's cognitive analysis of prosodic irregularity (see n21) delivers critical perceptions deeper than any I have offered here.<sup>59</sup> Readers must await publication of Myklebust's argument, but a key point is that, by placing non-schwa vowels and long dips at line-end, Langland distorted or withheld the trochaic cadence by which alliterative verse routinely signals the end of a line. Whereas other alliterative poets give the satisfaction of neatly demarcated lines, Langland occasionally invites doubt that a line has ended. He modifies and disrupts an elementary unit of discourse, whose good order we usually rely on to structure meaning-making. One may draw analogies to the poet's handling of higher-level units of exposition, for instance, episodic form and patterned mismatches between the endings of *passus* and dream. Regarding Langland's *makynge*, a simple statement remains an elusive goal, perhaps by design.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Myklebust, “*Ars longa: Piers Plowman and the Problem of the Line-Final Dip.*”

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