

The Meter of the Ophni and Phineas Insertion in *Piers Plowman*

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Abstract: The C version of *Piers Plowman* has yet to earn much attention from metrists relative to the outgrowth of research into fourteenth-century alliterative meter since 1986. Langland's relationship to metrical tradition is idiosyncratic, a judgment that involves both this author's divergence from conventions characteristic of other alliterative poems and the recognizability of his own metrical *habitus* across his career. Scansion of an inconsistently alliterating passage new in C (Prol.95–124) illustrates in miniature the unusual problems thrown up by Langland's metrical practice and suggests that his metrical signature persisted over the years of his writing life. The Ophni and Phineas insertion is of special interest because it has been thought an unfinished draft.

Keywords: a-verse, alliterative meter, b-verse, *Piers Plowman* C, revision, William Langland

Introduction: William Langland's Metrical Signature

The principles governing alliterative meter in the fourteenth century have been discovered and elaborated in an efflorescence of specialist scholarship since the late 1980s. An area of focus is the “b-verse” or second half of the alliterative long line, which has been revealed to be an exceptionally well rehearsed dance of stressed syllables, unstressed syllables, and vowel sounds. While metrical experts initially bracketed William Langland's *Piers Plowman* as formally aberrant (Duggan 1986: 577–578; 2000: 75 n. 53; 2009: 169; Cable 1988: 63; 1991: 86; Putter et al. 2007: 5; Yakovlev 2008: 25; Russom 2017: 127), Ian Cornelius (2017: 7–17, 126–129; cf. Burrow 2012) has delivered an authoritative and concise analysis of the meter of *Piers Plowman* B in light of research progress.¹ Cornelius concludes, “*Piers Plowman*, in any of its versions, more persistently

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¹ Barney (1995, 2009: 277–285) gives two interim assessments. Cf. Lawton 1988: 244–246.

invites unmetrical readings than any other contemporary poem in this meter” (128). This conclusion superficially resembles the received view that Langland was not bound by the same principles of verse construction as coeval alliterative poets, except that, as adumbrated by the verb *invites*, Cornelius attends to the historically and phenomenologically dynamic practice of metrical scansion. Cornelius finds that most of Langland’s b-verses do fulfill the principles of fourteenth-century alliterative meter. Exceptions are numerous, and occasionally intractable, but by no means do they constitute a majority. Nor are exceptional b-verses mere chaos. They pose a small number of difficulties over and over again. Langland has a metrical signature. His relationship to poetic tradition is idiosyncratic, a judgment that has two sides. Idiosyncrasy involves both this author’s divergence from conventions characteristic of other alliterative poems and the consistency of his own metrical style across his career. Langland is the only Middle English alliterative poet for whom such a judgment is possible at the scale of the career, in the nature of the surviving evidence for a largely anonymous poetic tradition.

This essay supplements Cornelius’s work with scansion of a passage new in *Piers Plowman* C. Although the B version dominates study of *Piers Plowman*, due to the importance of B to the poem’s reception and critical estimation of its literary excellence, the C version commands attention as the final form of the poem promulgated by Langland. It, too, is excellent literature. Cornelius (2017: 128) notes that most *prima facie* unmetrical b-verses in *Piers Plowman* B were retained in C, strong evidence that these patterns go beyond scribal error or a momentary lapse of authorial reason. “In his line-work, as in other aspects of his poem, Langland was singularly adventurous” (128–129), and this remained true through the end of his writing career. *Piers Plowman* “invites unmetrical readings,” but there exist strategies for declining the invitation. I assess the metricality of the Ophni and Phineas insertion (C.Prol.95–124). The passage is of special interest to metrical study (cf. Salter 1978: 32; Hanna 1998: 182; Duggan 2009: 183–185) because it has been thought an unfinished, incompletely alliterative draft. Editors George Russell and George Kane guessed it was “the roughest of Langland’s drafts” (1997: 87) and “put in here without his direction” (88)! However that may be, the Ophni and Phineas passage is of a piece metrically with other and earlier segments of *Piers Plowman*. It illustrates in miniature the unusual problems thrown up by Langland’s metrical practice.

Crucially for this inconsistently alliterating passage, I follow Cornelius and others in distinguishing metrical stress assignment from the disposition of

alliteration.² Ironies of nomenclature notwithstanding, alliteration is not a metrical entity in alliterative verse. I avoid tilting the scansion toward the alliterating syllables. Alliteration and metrical stress sometimes do not coincide in *Piers Plowman* (Kane 1981; Duggan 1987a: 26–39; 1987b: 56–59; 2009: 172–179; Lawton 1988: 225–227, 230–233, 241). Here is an example of both stress shift and what might be termed alliteration shift (displacement of alliteration from a metrically stressed syllable to a nearby metrically unstressed syllable) in a single polysyllabic word (quoted from Russell, Kane 1997):

x x x a x S x S x

That here parsch[e] were pore sithe þ[e] pestelence tyme.
(Langland, *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.82)

In the notation I will employ, “A” represents a metrically stressed alliterating syllable, “S” represents a metrically stressed non-alliterating syllable, “x” represents a metrically unstressed non-alliterating syllable, and “a” represents a metrically unstressed alliterating syllable in a verse with no metrically stressed alliterating syllable. Scanned with stress shift and alliteration shift, *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.82b fulfills the choreography described for b-verses in specialist scholarship, in that this b-verse contains exactly two “lifts” or metrically stressed syllables (S), exactly one “long dip” or sequence of two or more metrically unstressed syllables (x...x), and a final “short dip” or lone metrically unstressed syllable (x), and all short dips are realized as the minimal vowel schwa (-e in *pestelence* and *tyme*).

Strange as it sounds, the separation of alliteration from metrical stress assignment in metrical theory implies the possibility of blank, that is non-alliterating, alliterative verse (Lewis 1935: 13). While alliteration shift represents only a minor adjustment to the mapping of alliteration onto metrical stress, it exemplifies the non-identity of the two systems in theory, a situation that could be felt – by fourteenth-century poets, audiences, or scribes, and by modern readers – as a step on the path toward the disentanglement of alliteration from stress in practice. The Ophni and Phineas passage comes closer to being blank alliterative verse than most any other bit of surviving English alliterative poetry.³ Modern editors are not the only ones who look askance at the pas-

² Cable 1991: 132 (“the word ‘alliterative’ refers to a superficial feature”); Yakovlev 2008: 24 (“end-rhyme or alliteration [...] are ornamental, rather than structural devices”); Cornelius 2017: 16 (“the taxonomic approach [to alliteration] misapprehends surface effects as *realia*”).

³ Lawton (1983: 75) describes *Joseph of Arimathea* as “an unrevised first draft of a full alliterative poem.”

sage. The reviser behind the wayward text of the Ilchester manuscript of *Piers Plowman* rewrote the Ophni and Phineas insertion in order to spruce up the alliteration (Pearsall 1981: 190–192; Hanna 1996: 209–213; Smith 2013: 209).

A second nuance concerns metrical phonology, or the metrically relevant shapes of words. In working up a model of the structure of the fourteenth-century alliterative b-verse, specialists have found it necessary to posit a variety of historically motivated but linguistically obsolescent *-e*'s (Cable 1988: 50–53, 1989, 1991: 78–79; Putter et al. 2007: 19–117; Yakovlev 2009a).⁴ Metrically significant phantom syllables include the vocalic endings of Old English, French, and Norse nouns and the historical inflections of infinitive and imperative verbs and weak and/or plural adjectives. These historical *-e*'s are not rare metrical expedients but normal usage in alliterative verse. Nicolay Yakovlev (2009b) went so far as to argue that the schwa of historical *-e* and certain types of terminal *-y* were the only vowels permitted in medial and final short dips in the fourteenth-century b-verse, for example, x...xSxSx. I will return to this surprising phonological requirement in the next section.

Langland's B-Verse

It is well to begin with the b-verse, where alliterative metrics has achieved a stringent consensus statement of basic principles, before proceeding to the “a-verse” or first half of the line, which remains rather mysterious. A first pass through the thirty-line passage turns up ten b-verses that do not adhere to either of the normative patterns in fourteenth-century alliterative meter as it is known from other poems, (x)Sx...xSx and x...xS(x)Sx.⁵ Certain hypotheses about meter and phonology can salvage metrical scansion for eight of these b-verses, though at significant theoretical cost as will be explained. The other two b-verses exhibit a rare but authentic asystematic metrical pattern found throughout the alliterative corpus.

Three b-verses can be accommodated by discounting historically justified *-e*:

⁴ By contrast, and to the detriment of the sharpness of his model of metrical structure and metrical history, Duggan (1986: 573–574 n. 18; 1988; 2010) posited a contemporary phonology for alliterative verse, discounting most historically justified but linguistically obsolescent *-e*'s in scansion, except for Langland (Duggan 1990). Cornelius (2017: 75–79) analyzes and historicizes the debate.

⁵ I assume metrical demotion of some semantically weak content words: Langland's *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.104b *writ*, 109b *do* (inf.), and 116b, 118b *holy*.

x x a S x S x

Conscience cam and [ac]cu[s]ed hem – and þe comune herde hit
(Langland, *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.95)

x A x x x S x

And chastisid hem nocht þerof and nolde nocht rebuken hem
(110)

x x x S x S x

Wel hardere and grettere on suche shrewed faderes.⁶
(122)

Forms without *-e* appear in three different classes of word with historical *-e*, namely singular verbs (*herde*), infinitive verbs (*rebuken*), and plural adjectives (*shrewed*, *-e* not spelled out). The form *herde* “heard” derives from OE *hyrde*. In *faderes*, *-e*⁻¹ represents a syllable dropped through syncope (cf. OE *fæd(e)ras*). The first two verses have a further metrical complication. An unstressed pronoun (*hit*, *hem*) occupies the final short dip, contravening Yakovlev’s principle that the final dip in the b-verse must be filled by schwa. While ignoring certain historical *-e*’s salvages these verses for expected metrical scansion, the manner in which language fills the last metrical position is still unexpected in these two cases.

Langland, like other alliterative poets, normally used a linguistically retrograde metrical phonology, but, unlike other alliterative poets, he sometimes substituted an innovative contemporary form for the traditional historical form. This is an unorthodox proposal and bears some discussion (cf. Duggan 1990: 181–191). Variable metrical treatment of words with historical *-e* characterizes Geoffrey Chaucer’s metrical practice, for example (quoted from Benson 1987):

x S x S x S x S x S x

Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke
(*Canterbury Tales* 1.954)

x S x S x S x S x S

Into myn herte, that wol my bane be.
(1097)

⁶ Frog has suggested to me that this b-verse could show double alliteration. Yet *suche* is a function word that would not normally contribute a metrical stress. Alliteration shift would be applicable in instances where the alliterating sound had been established in the a-verse, but the a-verse here appears blank or unalliterated.

In the first line, *herte* < OE *heorte* counts an etymologically justified *-e*, while in the second line the *-e* in *herte* is discounted in scansion. The disyllabic scansion is more common in Chaucer than the monosyllabic scansion, but it cannot be relied upon absolutely. If Chaucer provides a contemporary point of reference, Old English verse supplies historical precedent for facultative metrical phonology. There, verbal prefixes and the negative particle *ne* may optionally be excluded from the metrical count, a curious phenomenon Yakovlev – in the Old English branch of his important study of the development of alliterative meter – codifies as “the prefix license” (2008: 59–60). In b-verses like *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.95b and *þe comune herde hit*, Langland seems to implement an analogous option, deselecting historical *-e* from the count of metrically significant syllables. The analogy to Old English is admittedly imperfect, for there the excluded syllable remains present within contemporary grammar and, presumably, in performance, whereas the *-e*’s apparently dropped by Langland were already ghosts by c. 1390, when *Piers Plowman* C was first published.

Four other b-verses in the Ophni and Phineas passage have three lifts:

x A x x S x S x

And seide, ‘ydolatrie 3e soffren in sondrye places manye’
(*Piers Plowman* C.Prol.96)

x S x S x A x x

Thei were discomfited in batayle and losten *Archa domini*
(108)

x S x S x x S x

Fro his chayere þer he sat and brake his nekke atwene
(114)

x S x S x x S x

God was wel þe wrother and took þe raþer vengeance.⁷
(117)

The form *manye* is disyllabic (cf. OE *mongum*). Note stress shift in *vengeance*. Although two lifts are undoubtedly the norm in the fourteenth-century

⁷ Langland’s *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.112b and 113b can be scanned with two or three lifts indifferently, depending whether a content word (112b *domini*, 113b *anon*) is or is not demoted. The Latin gen. *domini* in the phrase *Archa domini* and the adv. *anon* occupy the gray zone between content word and function word.

alliterative b-verse, Yakovlev (2008: 180–184, 246–248) identifies b-verses with three lifts in both Lawman's *Brut* (c. 1200) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and these can be explained diachronically within Yakovlev's formalism as descendants of Old English half-line patterns with three lifts. Such verses, although outliers in Langland, are thoroughly attested. Two-lift scan- sion is possible, with demotion of 96b *places*, 108b *losten*, 114b *brake* (and discount historical *-e* in *nekke* < OE *hnecca*), and 117b *took*, but this strategy inevitably would begin to undermine the two-tiered prosodic hierarchy, in which content words like nouns outrank function words like articles. One must pick one's poison. Verse 108b incurs a further problem, in that it ends in a prohibited long dip. An anglicized realization *dom'ni* is conceivable. Latin in *Piers Plowman* tends to be domesticated Latin. Yet 95b and 110b, if they do not show anomalous loss of historical *-e*, establish a type to which other problematic b-verses may be assimilated.

Two b-verses have two long dips and are almost identical:

x x A x x S x

What cheste and meschaunce to þe children of Irael
(Langland, *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.105)

x x S x x S x

Anon as it was tolde hym that þe children of Irael.
(111)

These scansions assume synaeresis in *Irael*. B-verses with two lifts, two long dips, and a final short dip are rare but authentic in *Piers Plowman* (Duggan 1987a: 39–40; Cornelius 2017: 14; cf. Barney 2009: 283–285). Such patterns occur, rarely but authentically, in *Beowulf* (83b, 455b, 487b, *etc.*), in the b-verses of Lawman's *Brut* (Yakovlev 2008: 244), and in the b-verses of other fourteenth-century alliterative poems (Cable 1991: 90, *Cleanness*). The two long dips in *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.105b and 111b cannot be reduced by positing elision, synaeresis, or syncope. Nor is there evidence of textual corruption.⁸ This pair of asystematic b-verses is robustly asystematic, like others of the same metrical form in *Piers Plowman*. Both b-verses show the further difficulty of a non-schwa *-e-* in the final short dip, after synaeresis. In these

⁸ At Langland's *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.105b, seven manuscripts omit *þe*, but the art. is necessary to the sense and supported by 111b, where no manuscript omits it.

cases the repetition of a syntactical frame, [X] *þe children of Irael*, appears to swamp metrical normativity.

One problematic b-verse in the Ophni and Phineas passage, once again with a non-schwa -e- in the final short dip, does call for syncope:

a x S S x

In menyng of myracles muche wex hangeth there.
(Langland, *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.99)

Without syncope, the verse has three lifts, with promotion of the function word *there* (axSSxS), or else it has a long final dip (axSSxx). Even with syncope, 99b is unusual, with a separate word in the final short dip, like 95b and 110b, instead of a syllable with schwa as prescribed by Yakovlev. Probably syncope was a metrical option for Langland, to be used sparingly and in a restricted subset of grammatical contexts. Syncope of verbal -*eth*, a southern dialect marker, is attested in Chaucer's pentameter, for example:

x S x S x S x S x S x

What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?
(*Canterbury Tales* 2.1171)

In *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.99b, syncope triggers the placement of a non-schwa syllable in the final short dip, in a chain reaction of metrical divergence.

Or the reverse: a non-schwa syllable in a short dip disturbs adjacent metrical regularities. Cornelius (2017: 129) suggests that relaxation of the non-schwa principle was Langland's original metrical sin, tempting him to others. The Ophni and Phineas passage happens to provide no further evidence for this interesting claim about prosodic hamartiology, beyond the five otherwise problematic b-verses already mentioned as contravening the non-schwa principle in the final dip (*Piers Plowman* C.Prol.95b, 99b, 105b, 110b, 111b). That is, the twenty b-verses in the passage with expected accentual shapes also assign schwa to the expected positions. In this short passage, all medial short dips are occupied by schwa. Nonetheless, it may be preferable in future work on Langland's meter to follow Cornelius's lead by prioritizing phonology over accentuation. Certainly, in many other lines in *Piers Plowman* one finds b-verses with expected accentual shapes but unexpected placement of syllables with full or non-schwa vowels. Flouting of the non-schwa principle is part of Langland's metrical signature and the way he least tallies with Hoyt N. Duggan's early overstatement that "Langland's concept of the b-verse did not differ from that of other alliterative poets" (1987b: 51, retracted in 2009: 169).

Cornelius's powerful insight about the centrality of phonology to the metrical organization of the fourteenth-century alliterative b-verse swims against the accentualist tide of research in this area (cf. Cornelius 2017: 53–54). The insight has yet to be elaborated, even by Cornelius.

None of the ten problematic b-verses in the Ophni and Phineas passage is a convincing instance of a pattern with no final dip. Some of them raise the specter of a final long dip, though alternative construals recommend themselves in each case. To the extent that the alternative scansion is attractive, one can say that while individual verses occasionally violate general metrical principles, for historical as well as perceptual reasons, still some aspects of versification in the alliterative tradition were categorical. The fact that individual b-verses can usually be 'solved' in more than one way bespeaks the multiformity of Langland's metrical eccentricity.

Langland's A-Verse

Turning now to the a-verse, most everything is in flux. The a-verse is not well understood. It can be expected to remain so, given the dissimilarity between a-verse and b-verse in fourteenth-century alliterative meter. The large metrical repertoire of the a-verse counterbalances the small metrical repertoire of the b-verse. There never will be a succinct template for the a-verse like the one Duggan (1986; 1987a: 32–33; 1987b: 44–45; 1988; 1990: 158–159) and Thomas Cable (1988: 53–54, 67–68; 1989: 53–55; 1991: 85–113) independently discovered for the b-verse. Combining theoretical proposals from four corners of the field, one can say that fourteenth-century a-verses minimally obey four principles. I list them in descending order of scholarly confidence and consensus opinion, beginning with a claim no one in the field disputes and ending with one that requires significant qualification:

1. The a-verse must have at least two lifts (Cornelius's historically based principle: 2017: 15, 121).
2. The a-verse must have at least one long dip (Ad Putter, Judith Jefferson, and Myra Stokes's empirically based principle, 2007: 222–225; cf. Duggan 2001: 482–487, 494–497).
3. The a-verse must not end in a long dip. Polysyllabic content words at the end of the a-verse that would form a long dip instead acquire a second metrical stress, or function words at the end of the a-verse from what would be a long dip instead receive stress (Yakovlev's hypothesis of compound stress or metrical promotion, 2008: 163–167).

4. The a-verse must not have a metrical pattern that would be systematic in the b-verse, namely (x)Sx...xSx or x...xS(x)Sx (Cable's principle of asymmetry, 1991: 86).

The first and third principles are holdovers from Old English meter; the second and fourth are fourteenth-century crystallizations of long-term metrical-historical tendencies.⁹

While there is strong empirical and historical support for each of these four a-verse principles, one misses an overarching theory to explain why these (and only these?) regularities obtain.¹⁰ Indeed, the present essay is the first to combine them. In advance of a hoped-for theoretical synthesis, I address the four principles seriatim. Measured accordingly, Langland's a-verses are conventional. They are rhythmically complex, but complex within the wide latitude characterizing the a-verse in fourteenth-century practice.

1. None of the thirty a-verses in the Ophni and Phineas passage contravenes Cornelius's minimum of two lifts, assuming the promotion of *for* or another function word in *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.116a *And for bei were prestis*. Justification for promotion of a function word from a verse-initial long dip in a verse that would otherwise have only one lift comes from Old English verse, where all scholars accept it for an alliterating function word in the b-verse and Yakovlev (2008: 53), following Cable (1974: 23–24), argues convincingly for the same license for a non-alliterating function word in the a-verse.
2. All thirty a-verses have at least one long dip, as predicted by Duggan's scansion of a large corpus including parts of *Piers Plowman* B (2001:

⁹ All current theories of Old English meter posit at least two lifts per verse as the norm. Yakovlev (2008: 70–82) represents the two-lift minimum as a corollary of the principle of four positions per verse and the definitions of strong and weak positions (lifts and dips). Long dips were optional in certain definable contexts in Old English meter (Cable 1991: 9–13). For avoidance of final long dips, see Cable (1991: 16) (Old English) and Yakovlev (2008: 249) (Early Middle English). Compound stress at the end of the half-line, even for words with relatively light linguistic stress on the second stressable syllable, characterized Old English meter, for example, *Beowulf* 2860b *grim andswaru* (SSSx) (Cable 1991: 16–26). (NB: Cable 1991 employs a different scansion notation than that of the present essay, but the difference is immaterial to the points of agreement between Old English and Middle English alliterative metrical theory identified in this note.) Promotion of a verse-final function word was a principle of Old English verse syntax, for example, *Beowulf* 24b *lofdædum sceal* (SSxS) (Kendall 1991: 43–47). Old English meter showed symmetry in metrical repertoire between the halves of the line; Early Middle English alliterative meter fell in between Old and Middle in this regard.

¹⁰ Promising work toward a unified theory of the fourteenth-century alliterative a-verse, based in metrical history, includes Yakovlev 2008: 155–184; Russom 2017: 176–258.

499–500 n. 14) and Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes's scansion of *Alexander and Dindimus* and the *Siege of Jerusalem*.

3. Nearly all the a-verses with apparent final long dips have two content words, as Yakovlev found to be the case for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

1 2
In menyng of myracles muche wex hangeth there
(Langland, *Piers Plowman* C.Prol.99)

1 2
That lewed men in mysbileue lyuen and dyen
(102)

1 2
Ful on hem þat fre were thorwe two fals prestis
(106)

1 2
Thei were discomfited in batayle and losten *Archa domini*
(108)

1 2
Anon as it was tolde hym that þe children of Irael
(111)

1 2
Were disconfit in batayle and *Archa domini* lorn
(112)

1 2
And al was for vengeance he bet noght his children
(115)

1 2
That soffreth men do sacrefyce and worschipe maumettes
(119)

1 2
 God shal take vengeaunce on alle suche prestis
 (121)

1 2
 For zoure shrewed soffraunce and zoure oune synne.
 (124)

The common noun 119a *men* and the infinitive verb 121a *take* are sufficiently bland not to count as content words. By the lights of Yakovlev’s analysis, verse-final content words like 119a *sacrefyce* and 115a, 121a *vengea(u)nce* have compound stress, while the verse-final function words 106a *were* and 111a *hym* are promoted. Both phenomena mirror the treatment of polysyllabic content words and verse-final function words in Old English verse. The concentration of apparent final long dips in a-verses with two content words was Yakovlev’s smoking gun for establishing the *Gawain* poet’s avoidance of final long dips in the a-verse. Yakovlev noticed that a-verses with apparent final long dips in *Gawain* overwhelmingly (207 of 210 instances) had only two content words, and that the vast majority of these a-verses ended in a word capable of carrying secondary stress on its final or penultimate syllable. As Yakovlev puts it pithily, “2+1 is fine, but 3+1 is too much” (2008: 166). However, he found that the *Gawain* poet did write a very small number of “3+1” a-verses – a finding that does not deprive Yakovlev’s statistical observation of its force. One a-verse in the Ophni and Phineas passage has a “3+1” pattern:

1 2 3
 Consience cam and [ac]cu[s]ed hem – and þe comune herde hit.
 (95)

Verse 95a may have four lifts (cf. Duggan 2000: 53–55, 74; Cornelius 2017: 118, 120) with promotion of *hem*; or three lifts with demotion of *cam* and promotion of *hem*; or even a hyper-rare final long dip. Whichever scansion Langland might have favored at the moment of composition or a later moment of proofreading, he composed such superheavy a-verses more often than the *Gawain* poet did.

4. As to Cable’s principle of asymmetry, five a-verses would make good b-verses:

x A x x x x A x
 I leue, by oure lord, for loue of zoure coueytise
 (103)

x A x x x A x
 What cheste and meschaunce to þe children of Irael
 (105)

x S a x S x
 For Offines s[yn]ne and fines his brother
 (107)

x x A x A x
 And his sones slawe anon he ful for sorwe
 (113)

x S x x x S x
 And for þei were prestis and men of holy chirche.
 (116)

The noun *lord* counts an unwritten historical *-e* representing the second syllable of Old English *hlaford* (Cable 1991: 79). Verses 107a and 116a are particularly b-verse-like in lacking double alliteration, a typical a-verse feature. Cable's principle of a-verse/b-verse asymmetry is a brilliant generalization and clearly grasps something basic about the alliterative long line, but it is incompletely systematized in fourteenth-century alliterative verse. Langland is more resistant to it than most.

Conclusion: Langland's Metrical Eccentricity

The Ophni and Phineas passage and, by extension and *a fortiori*, the C version of *Piers Plowman* as a whole, metrically resembles B as Cornelius and other students of alliterative meter describe it (cf. Weiskott 2016: 131–153). Langland's metrical style will have fluctuated from passage to passage and over time, yet there is a certain identifiable sameness, a recognizable house style, in all his verses. The qualities that threw metrists into doubt about the character of the Ophni and Phineas passage as alliterative verse fall well within the tolerance of "Langland's metrical *habitus*" (148, 150), according to a formalization made possible by progress in alliterative metrics. Contrast Duggan's conclusion: "Langland in the successive versions of his great poem moved further and further from the rhythmic, syntactic, and lexical constraints that governed other alliterative poets" (1990: 181; reiterated 2009: 184). The Ophni and Phineas insertion, as I scan it, contradicts the metrical side of Duggan's

assertion, at least, and aligns rather with Ralph Hanna's holistic sense of a poet who "wrote only one poem" (1996: 203), a poem continuously held in prospect, sometimes updated and refined, and sporadically leaked or disseminated to reading publics. The C version completes the picture of the career Langland made of rethinking alliterative verse. So far from spinning further and further out of orbit and away from consensual forms, Langland perfected his own eccentricity.

More work is needed on Langland's meter, particularly in its inter-versional development and in the C text. Because all other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century alliterative poetry of any length is both anonymous or effectively so, and poorly attested compared to *Piers Plowman*, Langland furnishes a unique opportunity to track metrical change not over the usual scale of centuries but in a single author's mind over decades. So far, by and large, the results are negative. Langland had his metrical preferences, and he stuck to them.

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