The Rise of English Printing and Decline of Alliterative Verse

Timothy Stinson

The origins of the Alliterative Revival have been the focus of a considerable body of scholarship over the past century: but what about its end? The question of why the alliterative long line vanished during a period that saw the beginnings of printing in England and a consequent increase in the circulation of literary texts has remained all but unexamined. This problem is all the more perplexing because many manuscript copies of these works date to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and, as Thorlac Turville-Petre notes, the poetry 'continued in high popularity in England'.[1] The question I will address in this essay is: did printing play a role in the disappearance of alliterative verse, or did printers simply ignore a waning form that had a small, possibly provincial audience?

[1] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1977), p. 122. On the issue of the Revival's origins, Turville-Petre represents one approach, that poets 'consciously — and by gradual stages — remodelled a written tradition of alliterative composition' with only tenuous ties to Old English (p. 17), whereas Derek Pearsall represents the other, that these works are continuous with Old English poetry, the survivors of a lost 'tradition of unrhymed alliterative verse, in written copies' ('The Origins of the Alliterative Revival', in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1981), pp. 1–24).

Timothy Stinson (*tlstinson@gmail.com*) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at North Carolina State University.

Abstract: Although the origins of the Alliterative Revival have been the focus of a considerable body of scholarship over the past century, little attention has been paid to the decline of the alliterative long line during the fifteenth century. This essay seeks to explain why this verse form disappeared as a vehicle for poets during a period that saw the beginnings of printing in England and a consequent increase in the circulation of literary texts, and why these poems were so seldom printed. Stinson concludes that of all known poems in the alliterative long line, only *Piers Plowman* clearly meets the combined criteria of popularity, orthodoxy, availability in multiple manuscripts copied in accessible dialects, evidence of local copying and readership, and sustained appeal and reception into the sixteenth century that would make a work in alliterative verse a likely candidate for printing during this time.

Keywords: Alliterative Revival, alliteration, Lollardy, *Piers Plowman, Jack Upland, Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, William Caxton, William Dunbar, Thomas Malory.

10.1484/J.YLS.1.100299

Even though the available manuscript record is notoriously spotty — we are fortunate to have any surviving copies of many of these works, and it is difficult to know how much has been lost — there are nevertheless plenty of indications that Middle English poems in the alliterative long line continued to be read and transmitted throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[2] Poems appearing in at least one manuscript copy that is either approximately coeval with or post-dates Caxton's first printed volume at Westminster in 1476 include:

Alexander A (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Greaves 60)

The Parlement of the Thre Ages (London, British Library, MS Additional 33994)

Chevelere Assigne[3] (London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A. 2)

The Destruction of Troy (Glasgow University Library, Hunterian MS V.2.8)

The Siege of Jerusalem (e.g., Cambridge University Library, MS Mm.v.14)

The Wars of Alexander (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 213)

Pierce the Plowman's Crede (London, British Library, MS Royal 18 B.XVII and Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.15)

Several copies of *Piers Plowman* (e.g., Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.iv.31 and Toshiyuki Takamiya, MS 23)

Saint Erkenwald, preserved in the almost exactly contemporary London, British Library, MS Harley 2250, which has been dated to 1477.[4]

[2] Another difficulty surrounding discussions of the Alliterative Revival (provided that one accepts the validity of such a corpus in the first place) is that of determining which poems the Revival comprises. I discuss here poems included in Chapter 3, 'Poems in the Alliterative Long Line from *c.* 1300 to the End of the Middle-English Period', of J. P. Oakden's landmark *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1930), and/or in David Lawton's formal and informal corpus of 'Unrhymed Poems of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century', in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background*, ed. by David A. Lawton (Cambridge: Brewer, 1982), pp. 155–57. Lawton's introduction to the latter volume provides a good overview of the difficulties associated with classifying the poems; my work here, like his, 'presupposes that such a grouping for study is worthwhile, so long as it is conceived not as absolute but as a means to a better understanding of Middle English literature' (p. 2).

[3] The alliteration of *Chevelere Assigne* is incomplete, and the poem's relationship to the corpus problematic, but it is included here as it is clearly a poem inspired by, and in dialogue with, the tradition of the Alliterative Revival.

[4] For the dating of Harley 2250, see C. A. Luttrell, 'Three North-West Midland Manuscripts', *Neophilologus*, 42 (1958), 38–50 (p. 39), and *Saint Erkenwald*, ed. by Clifford Peterson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), p. 11.

A number of other manuscripts containing poems of the Revival predate Caxton by at most a few decades, such as Additional 31042 and Digby 41; furthermore, the late-sixteenth-century Maitland Folio, which contains Dunbar's *Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, and the mid-seventeenth-century copies of *Death and Life* and *Scottish Field* found in Additional 27879 postdate the first printed book in England by nearly a century and approximately 175 years, respectively.

The overlapping of print and manuscript production should serve as a caution against the common tendency to speak of printed and manuscript books as quite distinct, and to divide the study of each of these into separate specialties. Printing was at first a new technology in an established book trade and overlapped considerably with the world of manuscript books and their makers. C. Paul Christianson notes that by 1403 'various book craftsmen sought to form a common fraternity, uniting older guilds of manuscript artists and of text-writers', suggesting that 'by the turn of the century, the trade was already sufficiently developed and competitive to make its regulation desirable, if not essential'.[5] And before the year 1500, there were 'at least 250 Londoners who made their living as makers and sellers of books'.[6] Although printing impacted and changed this business enormously, it did so gradually at first, and certain book artisans — paper merchants, parchment makers, binders — continued to work in the traditional manner in the decades following Caxton's arrival in Westminster. While it is customary to speak of printing as a revolution, and indeed in hindsight it was, in the day-to-day business of making and selling books it must have been a somewhat gradual one, and copying by hand remained a viable means of producing copies of texts for some decades.

That caveat, though, hardly diminishes the force of the fact that, while Dunbar's *Tretis*, *Piers Plowman*, and its imitator *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* were printed in early editions, no other poems in the alliterative long line were, and indeed the only other alliterative poem of any type printed in England in the century following the appearance of Caxton's press was 'The Quatrefoil of Love', a stanzaic alliterative poem that utilizes rhyme.[7] The next poem in the alliterative

[5] C. Paul Christianson, 'The Rise of London's Book-Trade', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. by John Barnard, D. F. McKenzie, David McKitterick, and I. R. Willison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–), III: *1400–1557*, ed. by Lotte Hellinga and J. B. Trapp (1999), pp. 128–47 (p. 128).

[6] Christianson, 'The Rise of London's Book-Trade', p. 129.

[7] Published by Wynkyn de Worde, probably around 1530. For a detailed discussion, see N. F. Blake, 'Wynkyn de Worde and the *Quatrefoil of Love*', *Archiv*, 206 (1969), 189–200.

long line to appear in print was *Chevelere Assigne*, which the Roxburghe Club published in 1820.[8] Yet these specimens are in some sense atypical, and special circumstances explain the fact that they saw print. Whatever the reason that the more typical poems of the Revival were not printed, it cannot be a lack of appeal of their subject matter, for the first century of English printing saw such titles as *The dystruccyon of Iherusalem by Vaspazian and Tytus* (STC 14517 and 14518),[9] *The knyght of the swanne* (STC 7571.5), *The historie of Quintus Curcius conteyning the actes of the greate Alexander* (STC 6142, 6142.5 et al.), *Here begynneth the lyfe of Ioseph of Armathia* (STC 14807),[10] Caxton's translation of Raoul Lefèvre's account of the destruction of Troy (STC 15375), and Caxton's famous edition of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (STC 801). This is not to suggest, of course, that printers borrowed directly from alliterative poems while changing the format of the alliterative long line (although this seems indeed to be the case with Malory, whom Caxton printed, as will be discussed in detail later), as the popularity of many of these narratives predated the Revival and extended across much of Europe. By the same token, we need to remember that alliterative poetry was not alone in being absent from early printing programmes: Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*, which survives in forty-three manuscripts, was never printed, nor were 'popular earlier verse religious texts' such as the *South English Legendary* and the *Northern Homily Cycle*, and 'the *Prick of Conscience* — the most popular of all Middle English verse works, as evidenced by the surviving manuscripts — appears to have been only printed twice'.[11]

[8] Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 127. As Turville-Petre notes, quotations from *Alexander and Dindimus*, *The Wars of Alexander*, and *The Siege of Jerusalem* appeared, along with long quotations from *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, in Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* in 1774. Additionally, *The Buke of the Howlat*, *Golagros and Gawane*, and *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (all of which employ rhyme) were included in John Pinkerton's *Scotish Poems* in 1792, and an edition of the C text of *Piers Plowman* was published by T. H. Whitaker in 1813 (pp. 126–27).

[9] *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad 1475–1640*, ed. by A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, rev. by W. A. Jackson, F. S. Ferguson, and Katherine F. Pantzer, 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Bibliographical Society, 1976); hereafter STC.

[10] Cf. the alliterative version of this story, not mentioned above, edited by David Lawton in *Joseph of Arimathea: A Critical Edition* (New York: Garland, 1983).

[11] Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards, 'Literary Texts', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (see n. 5, above), pp. 555–75 (pp. 561–62). Indeed, as the authors point out, only Chaucer and Lydgate seem 'to have sustained any approximation to his manuscript popularity

But by contrast to these individual specimens, we are talking about an entire, and major, movement of English poetry, much of whose subject matter being transmitted in manuscript copies was evidently popular with early printers and buyers of printed books in England during this time. The absence of printed versions of these poems is thus all the more striking. To date this problem has received only the scantest attention, and when the disappearance of the alliterative long line *is* mentioned, it is usually just a passing acknowledgment that the reasons for its disappearance are impossible to discern.[12] Yet there is a body of evidence, albeit a small one, surrounding the demise of this verse. And while we face the awkwardness of explaining not *why* something occurred, but rather why it did *not* occur, that is, why these poems did not make the transition to print, we have valuable evidence in the poems copied concurrent with printing, in the printed analogues to those poems, in the historical records of early printing and printers, and in those few examples where alliterative poems were printed or had demonstrable interaction with or influence on printing. We can and should use this evidence to develop and test theories of why the alliterative long line so rarely appeared in print, even if we will not arrive at an ironclad explanation of what happened and why. I will thus look first at some of the possible explanations for this phenomenon and then consider four texts or sets of texts — *Piers Plowman* and *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, the early black-letter edition of *Jack Upland*, Dunbar's *Tretis*, and Caxton's edition of Malory — to see how well these theories are supported by the best evidence we possess.

after the advent of printing' (p. 562). This point has also been made by the historian of printing Paul Needham, although he has not yet published on the topic. It was he who called my attention to the problem during a conversation in which he noted the many vernacular texts passed over during the early days of English printing.

[12] David Lawton notes that '[t]he apparent collapse of writing in the alliterative form in fifteenth century England is surprising given the artistic accomplishment of alliterative works in the second half of the fourteenth century. We should look for an explanation, but it is barely possible to supply one'; he follows with the suggestion that 'perhaps Chaucer's influence was heavily detrimental to the taste for alliterative poetry', but reaches no conclusions ('Middle English Alliterative Poetry: An Introduction', in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (see n. 2, above), pp. 1–19 (p. 13)). Turville-Petre, meanwhile, concludes his study of the Revival by documenting the final manifestations of unrhyming alliterative verse before jumping to its rediscovery by eighteenth-century scholars; he offers no explanation for its decline and makes no mention of printing other than noting that *Piers Plowman* and *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* were printed, but that '[a]ll other alliterative poems lay neglected in manuscripts, and vanished for a long time from the literary scene' (*The Alliterative Revival*, p. 125).

Perhaps the simplest, and on the surface of things most likely, explanation of why poems of the Alliterative Revival were not printed is that the movement was already on the descendant before the advent of printing in England. Turville-Petre notes that '[i]n England the creative force of the movement was spent by the mid-fifteenth century if not before'.[13] There would be little need, then, to explain the failure of these poems to attract the interest of printers and their customers if not for the rather important distinction between the composition of the poems and their subsequent transmission in manuscript copies. As Lawton notes, 'On the one hand, the majority of extant manuscripts containing Middle English alliterative poetry in rhymed or unrhymed form are of fifteenth century date and of diverse regional provenance [...]. On the other hand, it would appear that by the beginning of the fifteenth century the greatest of the unrhymed alliterative poems had been written', and that 'by the end of the century there are no indications of continuing composition outside the Lancashire and Cheshire area that produced *Scottish Field*.'[14] This situation of a fairly widespread reception history that significantly postdates the height of the movement's popularity has led A. I. Doyle to characterize the Revival as 'a predominantly fourteenth-century phenomenon' that survives 'overwhelmingly in manuscripts of the fifteenth century and some of the sixteenth and seventeenth'.[15] And it of course means that we cannot simply explain the dearth of early printed versions of alliterative poems by saying that the movement had lost its vitality, for the very business of printers was the production of copies of texts and, as demonstrated above, a significant percentage of these poems were being copied concurrently with the origins of English printing. Against this background of alliterative poems no longer being composed for the most part, but still being copied, there are three places to which we may look to explain why these poems were passed over: the poems themselves, the printers who selected what to print, and the markets that these printers were serving.

The Evidence of the Poems

The principle questions surrounding the poems themselves concern whether or not their alleged provinciality resulted in a diminished popularity or a limited, possibly regional, circulation, both of which would have obvious negative conse-

[13] Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 35.

[14] Lawton, 'Middle English Alliterative Poetry', p. 13.

[15] A. I. Doyle, 'The Manuscripts', in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (see n. 2, above), pp. 88–100 (p. 88).

quences on their chances of being printed. The poems have been widely regarded as provincial in a number of ways: the poet's setting, subject matter, and/or audience in some cases appear to be limited to a particular locality, and the dialect of scribe, poet, or both is often regional. Such a depiction of alliterative verse may be found, for example, in Derek Pearsall's claim that the poems 'were never marketable in London, the major area of scribal production, and it may be assumed that they had had no general appeal outside the northern and western circles in which they had their origin'.[16] Similarly, Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards suggest that the provinciality of this verse may 'have proved an impediment to its longevity' as well as to its chances of being printed, noting that 'Caxton, De Worde, Pynson, and later printers such as Copland and Tottel seem to have relied primarily on metropolitan or continental networks and gauges of popularity in procuring material for print'.[17] And, of course, it has become commonplace in discussions of this topic to mention Chaucer's Parson, who states, somewhat dismissively, 'I am a Southren man, | I kan nat geeste "rum, ram, ruf" by lettre', as anecdotal evidence that such provinciality was looked down upon in the fourteenth century.[18]

Although we cannot gain much knowledge of how alliterative verse was perceived in fourteenth-century England on the basis of its disavowal by a fictional character, the language of the surviving manuscript copies and, to the best of our ability to determine such things, of the original poets, is indeed frequently northern, as shown convincingly by Turville-Petre in the second and fourth chapters of his book. Beyond that, however, we must treat with caution the assumption that the poems were 'provincial' or that such provinciality was detrimental to their survivability or suitability for printing. Evidence of this does exist, but it is mixed with evidence to the contrary, and furthermore one must make distinctions between scribe, poet, dialect, subject matter, and evident circulation when making these claims, for one or more of these being regional in nature does not mean that a poem was provincial in every sense or that its circulation was regionally fixed or limited. In his study of the manuscript evidence

[16] Derek Pearsall, 'The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds', in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (see n. 2, above), pp. 34–53 (p. 40).

[17] Boffey and Edwards, 'Literary Texts', p. 568.

[18] Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, 10.42–43, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). For discussions of this, see, e.g., Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 30, Lawton, 'Middle English Alliterative Poetry', p. 13, and Pearsall, 'The Alliterative Revival', p. 39.

of the Revival, Doyle concludes on the basis of numerous examples (if not, indeed, on the basis of all extant examples) that 'wherever and whenever a piece of pronouncedly alliterative character originated, it could have a wide dissemination, by no means all amateur or provincial, and lasting beyond the middle of the fifteenth century, outside the northern regions'.[19] Such a statement simultaneously challenges a number of frequently held assumptions about these poems: that their circulation was limited to the area of their origin, that they were the work of amateur local scribes, and that they were confined to the fourteenth and early fifteenth century and, as the Parson suggests, to the north. Doyle thus confirms Elizabeth Salter's earlier assessment of the Revival when she noted that 'though its manuscripts are few and its language "local", its horizons are often very wide indeed'.[20] Doyle also 'traces the many London connexions (of various types)', including Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.15.17, a major *Piers Plowman* B manuscript, 'produced in a London or Westminster bookshop', Cambridge University Library Mm.5.14, which contains a copy of *The Siege of Jerusalem* in the hand of the London- or Westminster-based scribe Peter Frampton, and possibly San Marino, Huntington Library, MS Hm 143, an important *Piers Plowman* C-version manuscript.[21]

In the quarter century since the publication of Doyle's essay, his observations have been substantiated and expanded upon by a number of others. Ralph Hanna does both in detailing 'substantial evidence' that books containing alliterative verse were produced in London. He notes that up to a third of the B and C texts of *Piers Plowman* were copied there, as were other alliterative works, including those in the long line:

> [T]he scribes responsible for these books were simultaneously engaged in producing copies of London-composed poetry, works of Chaucer and Gower. One such scribe, active in the London book-trade *c.* 1415-40, copied at least two *Troilus and Criseyde*s — as well as a *Piers*, two stanzaic poems [...] and *The Siege of Jerusalem*. Indeed, at least four manuscripts of *The Siege* reflect a single archetype, already in London in the 1410s and later available for loaning out to scribes in other locales.[22]

[19] Doyle, 'The Manuscripts', p. 97.

[20] Elizabeth Salter, 'The Alliterative Revival. II', *Modern Philology*, 64 (1967), 233–37 (p. 236).

[21] This summary of Doyle's findings, including the quoted passage, is from David Lawton, 'The Diversity of Middle English Alliterative Poetry', *Leeds Studies in English*, 20 (1989), 143–72 (pp. 148–49).

[22] Ralph Hanna, 'Alliterative Poetry', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 488–512 (pp. 510–11).

David Lawton has built upon Doyle's work as well, arguing persuasively that '[a]t least before 1425, there is no reason to assume an audience for Middle English alliterative poetry distinct from that for all other English literary works', a claim supported by the fact that, aside from Cotton Nero A.x and several volumes containing only *Piers Plowman*, all manuscripts containing alliterative poetry also contain 'other items, prose or verse, of many different genres and types, and not always in English, especially before 1400'.[23]

Of particular importance to our consideration of the relationship of printing and alliterative verse is the date of 1425 given by Lawton, 'by which time we are able to speak of a dominant taste' in London 'that at least sidelined alliterative texts'.[24] This dominant taste, of course, included the poetry of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, but increasingly excluded alliterative verse. We should, as Elizabeth Salter encourages, avoid 'designating a "school" of writing' to these courtly poets and their peers,[25] but it seems fair to make the generalization that their work was in greater favour in fifteenth-century London than that of the alliterative poets, with the possible exception of Langland. There is, however, substantial evidence, such as that articulated by Hanna above, that alliterative poems circulated in manuscripts in a wide variety of contexts and alongside a considerable variety of genres, dialects, and even languages; that some of these manuscripts clearly had London connections; and that some alliterative poets, such as the author of *St Erkenwald*[26] and Langland, were evidently familiar with the city.

It is thus an oversimplification to label alliterative poems 'provincial', at least without further clarification of what is meant by such a label. But if all one means by this term is that most of these poems were not products of London, or central to the literary life of that metropolitan centre, then this seems a defensible generalization when applied to the latter part of the fifteenth century. Even if

[23] Lawton, 'The Diversity of Middle English Alliterative Poetry', p. 149. Lawton does not mention the *Piers Plowman* examples, stating incorrectly that Cotton Nero A.x is the sole instance of such a manuscript even though there are a number of *Piers* manuscripts containing only that work (e.g., London, British Library, MSS Additional 10574, Additional 35287, and Cotton Caligula A.xi, part 2). This omission, however, does not diminish the validity or importance of Lawton's point that alliterative verse typically circulated with wide varieties of other texts.

[24] Lawton, 'The Diversity of Middle English Alliterative Poetry', p. 149.

[25] Elizabeth Salter, *Fourteenth-Century English Poetry: Contexts and Readings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 119.

[26] Ad Putter notes that *St. Erkenwald* 'evokes a vivid picture of late fourteenth-century London' that suggests a poet with first-hand knowledge of the city (*'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 193).

interest in alliterative poems continued in England throughout the fifteenth century, the majority of evidence linking the Revival to London is from the first half of that century or earlier. This fact is of vital importance to our topic because English printing not only originated just outside of London in Westminster, but also was dominated by and centred in London for some time thereafter, as evidenced by the name recognition of Caxton, de Worde, Pynson, and other London- or Westminster-based printers, and also by their much larger output as measured against other English printers and presses. Norman Blake's tally of English incunables lists a total of 337 titles from London or Westminster, but only seventeen from Oxford, the site of the second English printing press, eight from St Albans, home to the third press, and two from 'others'.[27]

The Evidence of the Printers: Caxton and his Market

It is not entirely clear whether alliterative poems (aside from *Piers Plowman*, which was evidently well known and enjoyed some popularity) were sufficiently marginalized in London by the time Caxton started printing that he and his associates were simply unaware of the vast majority of them, or whether his own personal tastes, and those of his peers and successors, led to the intentional avoidance of these texts when they were encountered. It is clear, however, that the world of English printing during the incunable era and well into the sixteenth century was small enough that personal tastes, and particularly those of Caxton, could play a central role in which literary texts reached the public; and of course once printed texts began to appear, they themselves began to shape expectations of what English poetry should be and to create and influence the popularity of authors. All of these things can, and probably did, operate and interact in mutually reinforcing ways. Caxton's appreciation of certain authors and texts and his decisions to print them were almost certainly shaped both by what he was exposed to and what he expected his audience not only to be familiar with, but to value. The printing of such texts, in turn, served to popularize and disseminate them while further marginalizing any texts not chosen.

We are fortunate to know quite a bit about Caxton and, to a limited extent, his tastes in literature. Caxton focused on printing English vernacular texts, apparently choosing not to compete with Latin or scholastic texts already available from

[27] Norman Blake, 'The Spread of Printing in English', in *William Caxton and English Literary Culture* (London: Hambledon, 1991), pp. 57–73 (p. 72). This essay was originally published in *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* (1978), 43–50.

Continental printers.[28] When he did print Latin texts, they tended to be 'Latin works exclusively for use in England, such as Books of Hours of Sarum Use, or Clement Maydestone's *Directorium Sacerdotum*', with the result being that the 'character of book production in the British Isles had a strong national identity, long before the kingdoms became united'.[29] This was true not only of Caxton, but of his immediate successors as well; both the Oxford and St Albans presses quickly ceased production, and Caxton's London contemporaries and followers, including Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson, continued this mode of production. As Blake notes, 'The example of Caxton lay like a heavy shadow across the English publishing scene and encouraged other printers to produce only work in English.'[30] One would think that this emphasis on English vernacular texts would bode well for alliterative verse, which certainly had a 'strong national identity', but evidently it did not.

Caxton was born in Kent, but spent approximately three decades of his adult life working as a merchant on the Continent. Some of the literary texts that he chose to print upon his return must have been familiar to him from his earlier years, and were evidently quite popular and available in numerous manuscript copies when he arrived on the outskirts of London after his absence living abroad. For example, over eighty manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, almost fifty of *Confessio Amantis*, and a very large number containing Lydgate's works survive today.[31] The language of these poets would have been a bit dated by the latter part of the fifteenth century, and indeed Caxton's own dialect may by this time have been 'a slightly outdated mode of speech, sharing as many of the habits of bygone poets like Hoccleve, Lydgate, and Chaucer as of modern speakers born in the last quarter of the fifteenth century'.[32] But the language of these manuscripts still would have been somewhat familiar to Caxton and, given the popularity of these authors as evidenced by manuscript circulation, not a significant barrier to their

[28] Blake, 'The Spread of Printing in English', p. 70.

[29] Lotte Hellinga, 'Printing', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (see n. 5, above), p. 68.

[30] Blake, 'The Spread of Printing in English', p. 70.

[31] For a census of Lydgate manuscripts, see 'Manuscripts of the Major Works (by Title)', in Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449): A Bio-bibliography* (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1997), pp. 68–80.

[32] Tim William Machan, 'Early Modern Middle English', in *Caxton's Trace*, ed. by William Kuskin (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 299–322 (p. 299). Machan discusses the likelihood that these authors were known to Caxton during his youth and posits that he looked to his personal past for texts to print.

reception by Caxton's potential market. None of these authors, however, was associated with the alliterative movement, and their dialects were not those of the north and west that are frequently found in manuscript copies of alliterative verse.

It may well be that Caxton, also a southern man, cared not for 'rum, ram, ruf' and thus chose not to print alliterative poetry (although we have no direct evidence of this, as will be discussed later). And certainly if the dialects and vocabulary of courtly poets were already outmoded, and those common in alliterative verse likely difficult for or foreign to Caxton (assuming for a moment that he and his contemporaries had access to manuscripts containing this verse), this effect must have been amplified considerably for the foreign-born printers such as Richard Pynson, Wynkyn de Worde, and William de Machlinia, who followed him and who dominated English printing after his death. If, for example, in his 1492 edition of the *Canterbury Tales* Pynson was concerned with regularizing and replacing Chaucerian spellings that had been more or less preserved by Caxton a decade before,[33] then the language and diction of Revival poems must have been more vexing to him, and such texts would not seem good choices for the London market of the time. The effect that the dialect of both poets and printers had on which texts saw print remains speculation.

But even if Caxton's tastes were a contributing factor, they could not have been the sole explanation for his decisions. The evidence suggests that he was printing texts that were readily available in manuscript copies, that were often already popular, and that were not available by import from Continental printers. While alliterative English poems certainly fit the latter criterion, non-alliterative verse seems to have been more popular, and correspondingly a better choice for publication in Caxton's ambit. If we are to obtain a full image of why he chose the texts he did, then, we need to consider his customers and the demands of the market. These demands would have taken the form of both speculative printing and marketing on the one hand, with Caxton simultaneously occupying roles of printer, publisher, and marketer, and of patronage on the other, with Caxton subsidized by and printing on behalf of a wealthy benefactor or customer. The names of many of his patrons, such as the Earl of Arundel, Edward IV, Margaret of Burgundy, and Earl Rivers, are known through Caxton's prologues, epilogues, and dedications.[34] But, as has been argued by Yu-Chiao Wang, Caxton's repeated

[33] See Simon Horobin, *The Language of the Chaucer Tradition* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), pp. 81–87.

[34] For discussion of Caxton's relationship to these patrons, see N. F. Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973), p. 29. This volume also contains transcriptions of relevant prologues, epilogues, and colophons from Caxton's editions.

mention of his debts, financial and personal, to members of the aristocracy who backed his publications indicates neither that most of his readers were members of this elite group nor that Caxton was relieved entirely of the necessity of successfully marketing these same books in order to make a profit:

> We have only limited knowledge of how Caxton financed his publishing business but, as many scholars have noted, the simple fact of mass production suggests that he needed a market for his publications. Caxton's prologues and epilogues, with their emphasis on the court and courtliness, appealed to this market by drawing on the court's status as a traditional center for literary authority. The value that noble patrons lent to mass-produced books was symbolic, even when the printer had also received a fee for his translation. Thus, naming members of the royal court and aristocracy in his prologues and epilogues was a way for Caxton to advertise the books rather than simply an expression of gratitude for financial support.[35]

After considering a wide variety of evidence found in copies of romances printed by Caxton, including ownership marks and annotations, Wang finds only occasional signs of courtly ownership, and concludes that '[m]erchants, clerics, lawyers, landed families, servants of the nobility, and state officials — rather than aristocrats — seem to have formed the major readership' of these books.[36]

In either case — free market or patronage — there is no evidence of a demand for alliterative verse. N. F. Blake argues that Caxton 'confined his publishing to the works of the courtly poets', and that the 'alliterative style had ceased to be fashionable at court', but does not expand this argument beyond noting that Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, all of whom were printed by Caxton, 'were regarded as the three poets who had established the courtly style' in the following centuries.[37] This argument leaves unanswered the question of the role Caxton played in elevating and shaping the future status of these poets, but that their work was more fashionable during Caxton's day than at least the great majority of alliterative poems seems almost certain. Whatever his reason for eschewing the verse, however, it is difficult to imagine that there was a significant demand for it from either patrons or customers that went unmet. We can only assume that

[35] Yu-Chiao Wang, 'Caxton's Romances and their Early Tudor Readers', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 67 (2004), 173–88 (pp. 176–77).

[36] Wang, 'Caxton's Romances', p. 188. Similarly, N. F. Blake argues that 'it was courtiers and merchants who had the money for book buying and who were prepared to indulge their taste for what was fashionable and ephemeral reading matter', and that this was a viable business model since the very nature of shifting fashions and 'ephemeral' texts meant that 'Caxton could never produce sufficient books to satiate this market' ('The Spread of Printing in England', p. 69).

[37] Norman Blake, *Caxton and his World* (London: House & Maxwell, 1969), pp. 70–71.

those busy copying alliterative poems in manuscript form at this time were not Caxton's core market or were too few in number to warrant the printing of such works.

English Printing and Alliterative Poetry: 'Piers Plowman', 'Pierce the Plowman's Crede', and 'Jack Upland'

We are now in a good position to turn to the task of examining those texts that did survive and provide the best evidence of the relationship of the poems of the Alliterative Revival to early printing in England, after which we will turn to the situation in Scotland as well. Only two poems in the alliterative long line, *Piers Plowman* and *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, were printed during the first century of English printing: the former, of course, in three separate editions by Robert Crowley in 1550, and the latter in 1553 by the Dutch-born Reyner Wolfe and again in 1561, when Owen Rogers included it with a reprint of Crowley's *Piers Plowman*.[38] Among alliterative poems, *Piers Plowman* is widely known to be exceptional for many reasons. We know with reasonable certainty the name of the poem's author, an exception to the blanket of anonymity that lies upon other poems in the alliterative long line.[39] The more than fifty surviving manuscripts indicate that the poem evidently had a much wider circulation and enjoyed greater popularity than others poems of the Revival. It is a product of the south-west Midlands in a corpus that is primarily associated with and a product of the northern and western regions of England. The poem and poet inspired a number

[38] The three Crowley editions are STC 19906, 19907a, and 19907, referred to in the Kane-Donaldson edition as Cr^1, Cr^2, and Cr^3, respectively. Wolfe's edition of *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* is STC 19904. Rogers's edition is STC 19908; it is based on Crowley's third edition, and reprints *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* from STC 19904.

[39] The attribution of the poem to Langland has not been without controversy, and little is known about the poet other than his name and its association with the poem. As Ralph Hanna notes, the past century has seen 'substantial controversy about the authorship of the three versions of *Piers Plowman*', but '[a]t this time scholars who believe that *Piers Plowman* includes the work of more than one hand are few'; see *William Langland*, Authors of the Middle Ages, 3 (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993), p. 1. The first section of Hanna's volume, 'The Poet and his Life', outlines the difficulties associated with the attribution of the poem, including the fact that early documents reflect a variety of names and spellings, e.g., sixteenth-century attributions of the work to 'Robert Langland' (pp. 1–6). See also George Kane, *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship* (London: Athlone, 1965), and now 'William Langland', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxfordnb.com> [accessed 13 March 2008].

of imitators, a group of poems dubbed the '*Piers Plowman* Tradition', which, as Pearsall notes, 'with the exception of *Death and Life*, all come from outside the traditional northern and western home of alliterative verse'.[40] Furthermore, the poem stands out not only in being associated with the south-west of England, but in eclipsing its local association almost entirely in its circulation, with all three versions reaching 'a virtually nationwide distribution within a generation of their production'.[41] Langland eschewed the specialized vocabulary that is typical of most poems of the Revival, and as Hoyt N. Duggan has demonstrated, his 'alliterative style is distinctive in a variety of ways: he uses more of the syntactic resources of the language than most other poets; he writes a longer line, one with more syllables and often more words per half-line; he writes with many times more rhythmically and semantically "heavy" b-verses than the other poets; and he writes to a modified set of alliterative rules'.[42]

The fact that *Piers Plowman* was printed at all, of course, should be added to this list of the ways that the poem is exceptional. And given the size and scope of this list, it seems fitting that the circumstances surrounding its printing are also unusual in a number of ways. Although the poem's popularity is amply evidenced by both the number and variety of surviving manuscripts and the powerful influence it exerted on other literary and polemical works, both in verse and prose, it was not printed for almost two centuries after the likely date of Langland's earliest version (although printing was, of course, not yet a possibility during much of that time). It is tempting to search for a cause-and-effect relationship between the poem's anomalies and the fact that it was printed when its peers were not. Indeed it would not be illogical to assume that a poem that was so demonstrably popular with both the public and other authors, and that features a less archaic and specialized vocabulary, would be the most likely candidate for printing; it was both the best known and among the most accessible of poems in the alliterative long line. But if these were the reasons *Piers Plowman* saw print, publication most likely would have occurred much sooner than it did, for the poem's popularity must have been no secret to Caxton and other printer-publishers who followed him. Furthermore, although Langland's vocabulary is more manageable than that of other poems of the Revival, it would have been

[40] Pearsall, 'The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds', p. 40.

[41] Anne Middleton, 'The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*', in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (see n. 2, above), pp. 101–23 (p. 101).

[42] Hoyt N. Duggan, 'Notes Toward a Theory of Langland's Meter', *YLS*, 1 (1987), 41–70 (pp. 41–42).

outmoded in Caxton's day, and even more so by Crowley's, as would the metrical pattern of the long line. Indeed Crowley provides a reasonably accurate synopsis of Langland's metre that reveals his assumption that his audience would find it unfamiliar: 'He wrote altogyther in miter; but not after y^{e} maner of our rimers that write nowe adayes (for his verses ende not alike) but the nature of hys miter is, to haue thre wordes at the leaste in euery verse whiche beginne with some one letter.' Crowley follows this with a sample of Langland's verse and a rather charming warning to the reader that '[t]he Englishe is according to the time it was written in, and the sence somewhat darke, but not so harde, but that it may be vnderstande of suche as will not sticke to breake the shell of the nutte for the kernelles sake'.[43] Apparently such an overture was warranted, for a few decades later George Puttenham remarks in *The Arte of English Poesie* that Langland's 'verse is but loose meetre, and his termes hard and obscure, so as in them is little pleasure to be taken'.[44]

Thus, although *Piers Plowman* differs markedly from other poems in the alliterative long line, excepting of course those poems that were conscious imitations, we cannot turn to these differences for a compelling explanation for why *Piers* was printed when they were not. Instead, we need only look to the same preface where readers are both encouraged and warned about Langland's verse and language to discover the source of Crowley's interest in the poem, as well as his reason for choosing to print it:

> We may iustly co[n]iect therfore y^{t} it was firste written about two hundred yeres paste, in the tyme of Kynge Edwarde the thyrde. In whose tyme it pleased God to open the eyes of many to se hys truth, geuing them boldnes of herte, to open their mouthes and crye oute agaynste the worckes of darckenes, as did Iohan wicklefe, who also in those days translated the holye Bible into the Englishe tonge, and this writer who in reportynge certaine visions and dreames, that he fayned him selfe to haue dreamed : doeth moste christianlye enstruct the weake, and sharply rebuke the obstinate blynde.[45]

Crowley, a 'zealous Protestant polemicist',[46] was attracted to *Piers Plowman* due to his belief that the poem was associated with John Wyclif, a contemporary of

[43] From the forward to Crowley's edition, STC 19906, 'The Printer to the Reader', ii^{r}–ii^{v}. Early English Books Online, 2008. Crowley included this in all three of his editions.

[44] STC 20519.5, p. 50. Published in London by Richard Field in 1589. Early English Books Online, 2008.

[45] 'The Printer to the Reader', ii^{r}.

[46] Carter Hailey, '"Geuyng light to the reader": Robert Crowley's Editions of *Piers Plowman* (1500)', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 95 (2001), 483–502 (p. 483).

Langland whose writings and teachings were instrumental in giving rise to Lollardy. As Carter Hailey notes, Crowley's motives form a stark contrast with those that governed Caxton:

> Whereas Caxton's choices had been guided largely by his commercial sense, Crowley, whose most substantial undertaking to that point had been to publish his own metrical rendering of the *Psalter*, printed *Piers Plowman* as a public service, to further the ends of his radical religion by invoking the historical basis of English Protestant theology.[47]

It would seem that his output was nonetheless a successful business venture, given the fact that three editions appeared within a year. *Piers Plowman* was printed not because of its popularity, its perceived literary merit, or its capacity to sell, then, although it seems to have had all three going for it, but rather because it was deemed by Crowley to suit his efforts at proselytizing.

Some scholars have used the alleged Lollard leanings of Langland and his work to explain the fact that *Piers Plowman* was not printed prior to the sixteenth century, or asserted that it was on a list of books banned during the reign of Henry VIII.[48] Hailey argues persuasively, however, that neither belief is well grounded. In response to claims that '*Piers Plowman* would have been considered a dangerous text and its dissemination thus limited by either or both the chilling effect of Arundel's *Constitutions* of Oxford (promulgated in 1409 but still retaining at least nominal potency well into the sixteenth century), or from statutory prohibition under Henry VIII', Hailey observes that *Piers Plowman* texts generally appear 'in innocuously orthodox company' and never in compilations of Lollard texts.[49] Furthermore, Hailey follows Nicholas Watson in noting that the Oxford Constitutions focused on composing and circulating new works of theology in the vernacular, and that 'no serious attempt seems to have been made to restrict circulation of texts written before 1409 among professional religious or the wealthier laity'.[50] The claim that the text was banned, meanwhile, seems a simple falsehood; lists of banned books exist, but *Piers* is not on them, although there are 'two works with explicit references to plowmen that were banned: *A proper dyalogue, betwene a gentillman and a husbandman* (1530; STC 1462.3 and 1462.5) and *The praier and complaint of the ploweman vnto Christe* (1531; STC

[47] Hailey, '"Geuyng light to the reader"', p. 489.

[48] See Hailey, '"Geuyng light to the reader"', p. 486 n. 10, for a list of examples.

[49] Hailey, '"Geuyng light to the reader"', p. 485.

[50] Nicholas Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409', *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 822–64 (p. 831).

20036 and 1532[?] STC 20036.5)'.[51] These two texts point to the source of the frequently confused linkage of *Piers* to Lollardy that spans from the sixteenth century to the present day, namely that the proverbial figure of the simple, hard-working plowman had indeed become associated with and featured in a number of Wycliffite texts between the time of Langland's seminal work and Crowley's edition of it nearly two centuries later; this is a particularly complex problem, and one that has been sorted out admirably by Anne Hudson.[52]

A clear illustration of this complexity is found in *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, originally written *c.* 1393–1401,[53] and the only other poem in the alliterative long line printed in England during this era. Although this poem is based upon and shows a thorough knowledge of *Piers Plowman*, according to Anne Hudson it 'must be accepted as the work of a Lollard, even if a Lollard not on the extreme wing of the movement' due to its sympathetic treatment of the Lollard Walter Brut.[54] *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* is, then, simultaneously the poem most closely modelled on *Piers Plowman* and the one in the '*Piers Plowman* tradition' most in line with Lollard sympathies and Crowley's reading of Langland. As such, the potential for confusion regarding Langland's alleged Lollardy is obvious. Stylistically, *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* shares many of those features that set its predecessor apart from other poems of the Revival, and indeed Turville-Petre notes that the poet 'avoids words associated with the high style of alliterative verse even more rigorously than Langland himself'.[55] *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, like

[51] Hailey, '"Geuyng light to the reader"', p. 486.

[52] See Anne Hudson, 'Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*', in *A Companion to 'Piers Plowman'*, ed. by John A. Alford (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 251–66, and '"No newe thyng": The Printing of Medieval Texts in the Early Reformation Period', in *Middle English Studies Presented to Norman Davis in Honour of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Douglas Gray and E. G. Stanley (Oxford: Clarendon, Press, 1983), pp. 153–74.

[53] The poem survives in two sixteenth-century manuscripts (BL Royal 18.B.XVII and Trinity College R.3.15; see the list in the second paragraph above) as well as in the early prints discussed above. Additionally, a fragment of the poem survives on a single leaf of London, British Library, MS Harley 78, a manuscript from the latter half of the fifteenth century also containing poems by Chaucer, Wyatt, and Surrey. For a discussion of these manuscripts and an overview of the poem and its dating, see Helen A. Barr's introduction to her edition of it, included in *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 8–14.

[54] Hudson, 'Epilogue', p. 256. Helen Barr concurs with this assessment, calling the work 'the most obviously Lollard member of the *Piers* tradition' (*The Piers Plowman Tradition*, p. 9). See also David Lawton, 'Lollardy and the *Piers Plowman* Tradition', *Modern Language Review*, 76 (1981), 780–93.

[55] Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 71.

its predecessor, was printed long after its composition; it was written at the end of the fourteenth century, but not printed until approximately a century and a half later. Taken together, the printing of these two poems has much to tell us about perceptions of Lollards and the role of the plowman tradition in the early Protestant Reformation in England, as well as the role that printing itself played in this movement. But because the poems were printed so long after the dates of their composition, conclusions that we may reach tend to tell us more about the sixteenth century than they do about the final quarter of the fifteenth century.

Another work that bears special witness to the interrelationship of Lollard texts, the history of early English printing, and alliterative metre is *Jack Upland*, written in alliterative prose and first 'produced or revised in the early 1380s to early 1390s'[56] and printed by James Nicolson for John Gough circa 1536.[57] Like *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, *Jack Upland* is an antifraternal treatise; it survives in one English manuscript from the fifteenth century, London, British Library, MS Harley 6641, and one from the sixteenth, Cambridge University Library, MS Ff. vi. 2, as well as in the 1536 Gough edition. Although we have little indication of how the work was received in its own day, its reputation has been lackluster among modern critics.[58] *Jack Upland* is of particular interest due to the verse-like characteristics of its prose, which resembles alliterative verse to such an extent that it was printed in that format by Thomas Wright in his 1861 edition.[59] Indeed, Wright was sufficiently convinced that it was verse that he chided the editor of the black-letter edition for printing it in prose, noting that

[56] Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 216–20. Somerset's dating corrects that of P. L. Heyworth, who edited the *Upland Series* in *Jack Upland, Friar Daw's Reply and Upland's Rejoinder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[57] STC 5098. Two copies survive, one in the Huntington Library and the other at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. Gough attributed the work to Chaucer. For the relationship of Nicolson and Gough, as well as evidence attributing the printing to Nicolson, see P. L. Heyworth, 'The Earliest Black-Letter Editions of *Jack Upland*', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 30 (1967), 307–14.

[58] Turville-Petre calls the work 'unattractive', and includes it in a list of 'derivative pieces' that 'are very feeble, melancholy pointers to the decay of the alliterative style' (*The Alliterative Revival*, p. 122). P. L. Heyworth is equally harsh in his judgement: 'Incoherent in argument, drab, and repetitive in style, it has not even the honest vigor that can often redeem the polemics of the unliterary. It has a memorable ordinariness' ('The Earliest Black-Letter Editions', p. 307).

[59] *Jacke Upland*, in *Political Poems and Songs Relating to English History*, ed. by Thomas Wright, Rolls Series 14, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1859–61), II, 16–39.

> [t]he old editor was quite ignorant of the fact that it was composed in alliterative verse, and either he, or some one from whom he had it, had altered it so much, with the view apparently of removing the obscurity which seems to a certain degree inseparable from this class of old English poetry, by using common words for obsolete ones, and adding words and phrases to explain the meaning, that much of the alliteration is lost.[60]

We should be cautious in defining a boundary between alliterative verse and prose as well as in forming judgements of what constitutes 'corrupt' or 'incomplete' alliterative metre. That such a boundary exists or may be established is, of course, presupposed in the task undertaken in this essay. But although we may find what seem to be clear examples of both categories, it is important to recognize that they are not always clearly delineated, and that works like *Jack Upland* may more accurately be thought to fall somewhere along a spectrum rather than firmly in one category or the other. As Angus McIntosh has discussed, in a study of alliterative literature 'we must attach some significance to various kinds of similarity between the rhythmical structure (and in some cases other formal characteristics) of certain pieces which are normally regarded as poems and others naturally regarded as prose', but must also 'be prepared to straddle without hesitation the boundary implied, however imprecisely, by the terms "poem" and "prose work"'.[61] And while it is routine to encounter scribal versions of alliterative poems that are evidently corrupt, the degree to which poets were accomplished in or chose to adhere to an organized set of metrical constraints varied widely. Thus the fact that *Jack Upland* was printed remains relevant to this study even though it is a prose work.

The printing of *Jack Upland*, like that of *Piers Plowman* and *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, stands out as an anomaly for texts of its kind, occasioning Heyworth to pose a question similar to those set forth earlier in this essay concerning the printing of alliterative verse: 'Why, in or about the year 1536, was *Upland* accorded the dignity of print denied to scores of similar pieces?'[62] Heyworth suggests that the answer to this question is 'to be found on the title page and in the colophon of Gough's edition', much as Crowley's preface provides clues to the reason for the printing of *Piers*; it is 'that here *Cum priuilegio Regali* is not a perfunctory and permissive formula but constitutes the royal assent to what is

[60] *Jacke Upland*, II, 16, n. 1.

[61] Angus McIntsoh, 'Early Middle English Alliterative Verse', in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (see n. 2, above), pp. 20–33 (p. 22).

[62] Heyworth, 'The Earliest Black-Letter Editions', p. 312.

essentially an act of policy'.[63] The royal in question is, of course, Henry VIII, and the policy his well-known dispute with Rome. Heyworth argues that Henry had to use caution in dealings with his bishops, but that an antimendicant work such as *Jack Upland* would simultaneously avoid raising the ire of these powerful men while accomplishing the reforming agenda of the King and his chief minister, Thomas Cromwell:

> For *Upland*'s particular usefulness to the king lay in the limited nature of its anti-clericalism; it was concerned only with the mendicants, and such an attack as it mounted could hardly be expected to distress the bishops — especially when in the course of it the secular clergy emerged as models of propriety and virtue. It was catholic without being Roman and protested without being Protestant; and it suited the convenience of a reforming but orthodox king.[64]

Heyworth strikes a tone here that is perhaps more confident than the available evidence warrants; his argument rests largely on his reading of the *cum privilegio* of the title page and the colophon, the exact significance and meaning of which is very difficult to gauge at the moment in history when *Jack Upland* was printed. As Cyndia Clegg reminds us, the presence of *cum privilegio* on a title page has often been erroneously perceived as 'the mark of official permission or approval (license), implying a process of review and implicit censorship'.[65] Usage of this privilege could signal a number of concerns of the Crown, which, as Alexandra Gillespie remarks, might include a desire to protect both 'the value of mass production' for printers (and, less frequently, authors), whose profits might be threatened without such a privilege restricting the printing and sale of certain texts to them alone, and also the 'powerful, governing elite', as '[t]he products of the press had political uses'.[66] Furthermore, as we have seen already with Crowley, the aim and agency of the printer-publisher must be explored when attempting to discover why texts associated with Wyclif were printed in the early

[63] Heyworth, 'The Earliest Black-Letter Editions', p. 313.

[64] Heyworth, 'The Earliest Black-Letter Editions', p. 314.

[65] Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 9. Although Clegg focuses on the Elizabethan period, she refers here to the earlier Tudor, and specifically Henrician, period.

[66] Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and their Books, 1473–1557* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 165–66. For further discussion of *cum privilegio*, see pp. 205–06, as well as Meraud Grant Ferguson, '"In Recompense of his Labours and Inuencyo": Early Sixteenth-Century Book Trade Privileges and the Birth of Literary Property in England', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 13 (2004), 14–32.

Reformation period, and the mere presence of a privilege on the title page does not signal that the printer is without either. And based on the facts that in 1540 Gough printed *The doore of holy scripture*, known more commonly as the General Prologue of the Wycliffite translation of the Bible, and that he 'was imprisoned in January 1541 for printing and selling seditious books',[67] it would seem that he, like Crowley, was an active reformer. Even the attribution of the work to 'the famous Geoffrey Chaucer' on the title page — which might suggest that Chaucer's popularity, marketability, and apparent immunity to censorship explain the fact that this work was printed — lends weight to an argument for the reformist nature of Gough's edition, for there is 'evidence that Chaucer was closely associated with the Lollard analogues for reformist polemic as early as the 1530s', and indeed *Jack Upland* was '[t]he first edition of a Lollard text ascribed to him'.[68] The parallels, then, between the printing of *Jack Upland* and that of *Piers* and *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* are striking. Once again we find an alliterative work printed over a century after its composition when such works generally were not printed at all. And once again the best available evidence concerning the motivation for printing the work lies not in a ready market or the inherent literary value of the work, but in its usefulness to a proto-Protestant effort to reform the Church. The significance of these parallels is strengthened by the verse-like qualities of *Jack Upland*'s prose.

A Scottish Excursus: Dunbar's 'Tretis'

Having considered all extant poems in the long line printed in England, I will turn briefly to Scotland to consider the relationship of printing and alliterative poetry there to what was happening in and around London at the same time. Only one such poem originating in Scotland, William Dunbar's *Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, was printed during the period we have been examining. The *Tretis* occupies a special place in the history of printing as well as that of alliterative verse; it is widely considered 'to be the last great achievement of alliterative verse',[69] yet it was the first poem in the alliterative long line to be

[67] Anne Hudson, 'No newe thyng', p. 241 n. 41.

[68] Gillespie, *Print Culture*, p. 196.

[69] A. A. McDonald, 'Alliterative Poetry and its Context: The Case of William Dunbar', in *Loyal Letters: Studies on Medieval Alliterative Poetry & Prose*, ed. by L. A. J. R. Houwen and A. A. McDonald (Groningen: Forsten, 1994), pp. 261–79 (p. 269).

printed. The poem survives in the Maitland Folio (Cambridge Pepys Library, Magdalene College, MS 2553), a late-sixteenth-century manuscript containing a variety of Scottish verse, including a number of poems by Sir Richard Maitland and William Dunbar, and in a print from *c.* 1506 by Androw Myllar. Dunbar's poem not only provides evidence that alliterative poetry was still alive and well in Scotland, but that at least one poet was still capable of writing verse in the alliterative long line that rivaled the quality of the best works of the Revival.

The 1506 print of Dunbar's *Tretis* survives today in a collection of eleven booklets that are bound together and known collectively as the 'Chepman and Myllar prints'.[70] Booklets one through nine were printed collaboratively by Walter Chepman and Androw Myllar 'in the Southgait (now the Cowgate) of Edinburgh in or about 1508', and constitute the three 'earliest known dated books to come from the Scottish press'.[71] Although the tenth and eleventh booklets are bound with and said to be part of the Chepman and Myllar prints, the tenth, which contains the *Tretis*, was printed by Myllar prior to his partnership with Chepman, and the eleventh, an imperfect copy of *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, is unrelated to either, having been printed by the Antwerp printer Jan van Doesborch.[72] Booklet ten also includes three other of Dunbar's poems: *The Testament of Mr Andro Kennedy*, the poem of 'Kynd Kittock', and one beginning 'I yat in heill vves and gladnes'. It was most likely printed in Rouen, where we know Myllar to have been working just prior to his collaboration with Chepman in Edinburgh.[73] Beattie identifies the 92mm type used in booklet ten as the same used in both the *Expositio sequentiarum* and in *Multorum vocabulorum equiuocorum interpretatio*, which were 'printed abroad for Androw Myllar in 1505

[70] Facsimiles of the volume are available online from the National Library of Scotland at <www.nls.uk/digitallibrary/chepman/books.htm> and in *The Chepman and Myllar Prints* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society, 1950), which contains useful bibliographical notes by William Beattie.

[71] Beattie, *The Chepman and Myllar Prints*, p. ix.

[72] This text of *Robyn Hode* is the one included by F. J. Child in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1882–98), pt I, vol. III, pp. 56–78. For more on Doesborch, see Peter J. A. Franssen, *Tussen tekst en publiek: Jan van Doesborch, drukker-uitgever en literator te Antwerpen en Utrecht in de eerste helft van de zestiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990).

[73] McDonald, 'Alliterative Poetry and its Context', p. 273. See also Robert Dickson and John Philip Edmond, *Annals of Scottish Printing from the Introduction of the Art in 1507 to the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Bowes, 1890), pp. 36–42.

and 1506, probably by Pierre Violete, Rouen'.[74] Thus Myllar either had the *Tretis* printed there as well or, less likely, used the same type in Edinburgh immediately after setting up his new press.[75] Chepman and Myllar's expertise resulted in a 1507 patent from James IV affirming that they have

> at our instance and request, for our plesour, the honour and proffit of our Realme and Liegis, takin on thame to furnis and bring hame ane prent, with all stuff belangand tharto, and expert men to use the samyne, for imprenting within our Realme of the bukis of our Lawis, actis of parliament, croniclis, mess bukis, and portuus efter the use of our Realme, with addicions and legendis of Scottis sanctis, now gaderit to be ekit tharto, and al utheris bukis that salbe sene necessar, and to sel the samyn for competent pricis.[76]

In addition to the books pertaining to governance, law, and religion prescribed in the patent, Chepman and Myllar began printing vernacular poetry almost immediately; among the works surviving in the first nine booklets of the prints (as currently bound) are poems by Lydgate, Henryson, and Dunbar.

Although it may seem surprising that the first printing of a poem in the alliterative long line, a form associated most strongly with England and said to be provincially limited within that country, was the work of a Scottish poet and likely printed in France half a century before Crowley's editions of *Piers*, it is less unusual than one might suppose. This is the case for two reasons. First, as Turville-Petre notes:

> In England the impetus of the Revival waned in the fifteenth century, but in Scotland it gained a new lease on life. After about 1450 a number of interesting alliterative works were composed by Scottish writers, and quite quickly the style and the vocabulary of the poems became more distinctively Scottish.[77]

Although the great majority of these alliterative works were not in the unrhyming alliterative line (Turville-Petre notes that the only other examples from Scotland are a few political prophecies),[78] with a preference instead for thirteen-line stanzas and alliteration combined with rhyming, Dunbar provides strong evidence that Scots poets, and likely audiences, were conversant with and appreciative of the

[74] Beattie, *The Chepman and Myllar Prints*, p. xv.

[75] The possibility that Myllar printed the *Tretis* in Scotland 'before he joined forces with Chepman, with type brought from Violette's office', has been raised by William Beattie: 'Some Early Scottish Books', in *The Scottish Tradition: Essays in Honour of Ronald Gordon Cant* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974), pp. 107–20 (p. 113).

[76] The patent is transcribed in Dickson and Edmond, *Annals of Scottish Printing*, pp. 7–8.

[77] Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 115.

[78] Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 119 n. 10.

poems of the Revival. Second, there were strong trade and political connections between Scotland and France that had been built, both formally and informally, over several centuries of the Auld Alliance. As with so much of Scottish history, the border between England and Scotland represents far more than a geopolitical boundary when it comes to the history of printing. The two 'were separate countries, had different foreign alliances, different trade routes and looked to different intellectual centres', and consequently the books themselves 'underline these differences'.[79] Margaret Lane Ford has demonstrated that the Scottish book trade was influenced by France to a far greater extent than was the case in England; in the period to 1557, for example, Ford documents that France accounted for 52.5 per cent of all books in Scotland but only 24 per cent in England.[80] Just as was the case during the early days of printing in England, 'the demands of the Latin-reading public were met in Scotland by books printed abroad, and printing at home was not introduced until the demands of a lay, Scots-reading public made it a viable enterprise'.[81] The career of Androw Myllar provides a microcosm of this evolution, from his career printing Latin texts abroad to the establishment of a press in Scotland to fill the growing demand for his country's vernacular literature.

The significant contrasts between Dunbar's *Tretis* and *Piers Plowman* (and by extension *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* in most instances) should by now be clear. One was a ribald Scottish poem coming very late in the alliterative tradition and printed shortly after its composition. The other was an earnest religious work from England, a seminal work of the Revival that was widely read but not printed until almost two centuries after its composition. But again in the case of the *Tretis*, as with the other printings of alliterative works we have examined, we find a constellation of singularities, a grouping of anomalies surrounding both the composition and printing of the work. The poem stands out in Dunbar's corpus as his only work in the long line and, as McDonald notes, is

> exceptional in more than one way: in being the makar's solitary alliterative poem, and in departing from the stanzaic form which was almost *de rigeur* among Middle Scots poets writing in this manner. Within the alliterative tradition as a whole moreover, the *Tretis* also stands out in terms of theme [...]. [T]he chief distinguishing characteristic here is the prominence given to the element of comedy. In the case of the *Tretis* this hardly needs to

[79] Margaret Lane Ford, 'Importation of Printed Books into England and Scotland', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (see n. 5, above), pp. 179–201 (p. 181).

[80] Ford, 'Importation of Printed Books', p. 193.

[81] Ford, 'Importation of Printed Books', p. 201.

> be emphasized. Of all the Middle Scots comic poems this one has a claim to be considered as the funniest, and the marital histories of the two wives and the widow attain a level of concentrated hilarity not attained, perhaps, even by Chaucer.[82]

The printing of the work in Rouen, if indeed that is where Myllar printed it, was also unusual, not because a text for the Scottish market was printed abroad, as this was routine, but because vernacular, and moreover alliterative, verse was printed abroad. Among the ways that the poem is exceptional is that it was printed in what appears to have been a very small window of time after which Scots verse was first printed and before the establishment of the Chepman-Myllar press. Rhyming Scottish alliterative verse such as *Golagros and Gawane* and the *Buke of the Howlat* appeared in print very soon after this and seemed to be rather popular (a further contrast with England), but no other works in the long line saw print until the intervention of antiquarians centuries later.[83] Because printers in Scotland worked in different trade networks and in a much different, and often not overlapping, ambit from those in London, the example of Dunbar's *Tretis* does not provide direct evidence concerning the reasons alliterative works were so seldom printed in England. The many parallels, however, and especially the fact that the printing of this poem was attended by so many unusual circumstances, are telling, and deserve further investigation.

Malory, Caxton, and the Alliterative 'Morte Arthure'

Aside from these three, two in England and one in Scotland, no poems in the alliterative long line were printed during the first century of printing in the British Isles, and thus any further evidence concerning the relationship of printing to the Alliterative Revival must come from elsewhere. One such source, and one seemingly with the greatest potential for producing such evidence, is Caxton's

[82] McDonald, 'Alliterative Poetry and its Context', pp. 266–67.

[83] *Golagros and Gawane* appears in the second booklet of the Chepman Myllar prints. The *Buke of the Howlat* appears in two manuscript copies, the Asloan MS and the Bannatyne MS. We know that it must have been printed as well, for one leaf from a black-letter edition survives as a binding fragment. For a discussion of *Howlat*, see F. J. Amours's edition in *Scottish Alliterative Poems in Riming Stanzas*, Scottish Text Society, ser. 1, 27/38 (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1897; repr. New York: Johnson, 1966), pp. xx–xxi. Amours, following David Laing, notes that *Howlat* was either 'from the press of Walter Chepman' or 'at least printed at Edinburgh from the types he employed' (xxi). One portion of the leaf is now held in Cambridge University Library, and another in the Dundee Record Office.

1485 edition of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.[84] Although this is a late-fifteenth-century printing of a prose work written approximately fifteen years earlier (Malory states that he finished the work in the ninth year of the reign of King Edward the Fourth, which dates his work to 1469/70), Malory's use of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* as a source text and subsequent editorial efforts to remove traces of that alliterative work have bearing on the problem of how printing relates to and interacts with fourteenth-century alliterative verse. The enormously complex textual history of this work — that is, the relationships among Caxton's edition (C), the Winchester manuscript, discovered only in 1934 (W), and one of Malory's sources, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* — is very well known, and its details need not detain us here.[85] I will address only one point in the debate: whether Caxton revised Malory's text for printing, and if so whether a motivating factor in his revisions was to remove much of the alliterative language that Malory had inherited from the *Morte Arthure*.

Malory relied heavily on the alliterative *Morte Arthure* for Book V of *Le Morte Darthur*, frequently known as the 'Roman War' episode. The result as found in W is prose that is often

> dominated by the poem: it is highly alliterated, the phrases retaining the dactyllic and anapestic rhythms of alliterative verse; the syntax is marked by a high proportion of inversions of subject and object or noun and adjective; and the diction is remarkable for its high count of poetical archaisms and also for numerous northern dialect words and forms (many of which do not appear in *Morte Arthure*); the description is heavy with details, adjectives and figures of speech.[86]

[84] STC 801, printed in 1485. The complete copy is in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, and the partial copy in the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester. This edition was reprinted by Wynkyn de Worde in 1498 (STC 802).

[85] For many years the only version of Malory's text known was Caxton's edition (C), which survives in one complete and one incomplete copy. In 1934, a manuscript version of Malory's text (W) differing significantly from Caxton's edition was found in the Fellows' Library of Winchester College by W. F. Oakeshott (the manuscript is known today as Additional 59678). Despite the presence of only these two witnesses (or four if one counts the two copies of Caxton's text and de Worde's edition in addition to W), the numerous and substantial differences between them have engendered enormous debate among Malory and Caxton specialists and the resulting disputes have given rise to a cottage industry of publications taking a variety of positions on whether W or C is the more reliable. A useful starting point for this literature is *The Malory Debate: Essays on the Texts of 'Le Morte Darthur'*, ed. by Bonnie Wheeler, Robert L. Kindrick, and Michael N. Salda (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000).

[86] William Matthews, 'A Question of Texts', in *The Malory Debate* (see n. 85, above), pp. 65–107 (p. 69). This is one of the seminal essays in the debate and still one of the most contested.

Malory omitted lengthy descriptions of battles and feasts, 'the poem's opening invocation, its lengthy list of Arthur's conquests'[87] and many other details and episodes to cut the number of lines in his source by about half, all the while retaining much of the alliteration, northern dialect, and typical alliterative vocabulary of the *Morte Arthure*. Even so, Book V as presented in W is much longer than the other books in *Le Morte Darthur*, and its strongly alliterative prose is out of character with them. In C this is much less the case; Book V has again been dramatically shortened and the alliteration significantly toned down.

Takako Kato, having recently surveyed the field of linguistic and historical studies centring on the debate concerning who was responsible for these changes, concludes 'that both the language of the text and the historical situation support Caxton as the reviser' rather than Malory.[88] This probability seems all the likelier given the evidence that 'Caxton had two complete manuscripts' of Malory's text in his workshop, 'Winchester and another copy', one of which he must have used as his setting-copy.[89]

If we could demonstrate that one of the factors motivating Caxton was to rid his text of alliterative language, then it would seem clear that his personal taste is what militated against the production of poems of the Revival.[90] But we lack any

Its own history is both complex and colourful, as it remained unpublished for years after the author's death, circulating among Arthurian scholars in photocopies and inciting debate. This story is related in the introduction to the volume.

[87] Matthews, 'A Question of Texts' p. 69.

[88] Takako Kato, *Caxton's 'Morte Darthur': The Printing Process and the Authenticity of the Text* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2002), p. 5. For years it was assumed that Caxton was responsible for these revisions, as described by Sally Shaw: 'For this Book to have been at all comparable with his other seven, Malory would have had to reduce it from the original twice as much as he had already done. It was left to Caxton to do this, and also to remove much of the unusual vocabulary and style which Malory took over from his source' ('Caxton and Malory', in *Essays on Malory*, ed. by J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 114–45 (pp. 130–31)). A significant challenge to this theory was mounted in 1975, when William Matthews's essay 'A Question of Texts' was read posthumously at the Congress of the International Arthurian Society in Exeter; see note 86, above.

[89] Kato, *Caxton's 'Morte Darthur'*, p. 21. That W was in Caxton's workshop at one time has been established by Lotte Hellinga, who, in a remarkable study of the smudges of printers ink found on W, used tracings and measurements to document offsets that are exact matches with Caxton's types; see 'The Malory Manuscript and Caxton', in *Aspects of Malory*, ed. by Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: Brewer, 1981), pp. 127–141. Kato builds upon this work to show that a second manuscript copy was likely used as Caxton's setting-copy.

[90] Indeed such a claim has already been made by Norman Blake, who argues that the likely reason Caxton did not print *Piers Plowman* was because it 'uses the old alliterative metre with old

conclusive evidence of Caxton's motives. In proposing that the changes were Malory's own, William Matthews introduced a number of factors that may have motivated the author to make them (identifiable in the differences between the C and W texts), and any of these could apply to Caxton as well: not only was Book V by far longer than the other books, but the 'style was out of keeping with the rest of *Le Morte Darthur*' in that it closely resembled alliterative verse when the rest of the work did not, and the '[i]nversions of subject and object, subject and verb, noun and adjective' which W inherited from its alliterative source also make it an anomaly.[91]

Malory (as Matthews believed), or Caxton himself, would have had good reasons for his revisions, reasons that need not include a mere dislike for alliteration, and indeed these stand as viable motivations regardless of the reviser's identity. All of this speaks as well to what the editors of *The Malory Debate* term 'the matter of the quiddity' of *Le Morte Darthur* when they ask, 'is it *a* work, or (as Vinaver argued) *many* works?'[92] The title of Eugène Vinaver's landmark critical edition, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*,[93] reflects his conviction that Malory's 'work' was in fact a series of works, and that '[w]hen these volumes fell into Caxton's hands he realized that, as a matter of practical expediency, he had to make them into a single "book of King Arthur"'.[94] Thus Caxton (or indeed Malory) might have heavily edited Book V in an effort to achieve a single work from a series of romances, and not in an effort to remove traces of alliterative verse.

Not only do these potential motivating factors for Caxton to make his revisions present themselves, but also some of the changes that we find in C challenge the assumption that it was a perceived taint of alliterative verse that drove the reviser's actions. Matthews demonstrates that although 'W contains northernisms that do not appear in the alliterative poem [... ,] C also contains a number of northernisms which appear neither in W nor in the alliterative poem in the same contexts,

words arranged in the traditional English manner' and that he intentionally revised Malory's Book V to avoid 'alliterative groups' ('Caxton and Courtly Style', in *William Caxton and English Literary Culture* (see n. 27, above), pp. 119–35 (pp. 124–25, 131)). This essay was originally published in *Essays and Studies*, n.s. 21 (1968), 29–45. See also David Lawton, who notes that Caxton 'printed no alliterative poetry and excised much alliterative vocabulary from Malory's Book 5, direct from *Morte Arthure*' ('Middle English Alliterative Poetry: An Introduction', p. 14).

[91] Matthews, 'A Question of Texts', p. 79.

[92] *The Malory Debate*, p. xii.

[93] *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 3rd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); the first edition was published in 1947.

[94] *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, p. xxxviii.

viz.: "*stuffed* hit with two honderd sarasyns"; "he *graythed* hym and came to the bataille"; "an *awke* stroke"; "shall not *conne* staunche they blood"; "For *who someuer* is hurte"', etc. Furthermore, '[t]hat C is at times closer to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* than W is familiar from Vinaver's annotations. He records fifty-four such cases, ranging from isolated words to complete sentences. Helen Wroten in her admirably careful comparison of the two versions with the alliterative poem, notes at least five more'.[95] If indeed Caxton was the reviser, it is difficult to accept that he added northern language typical of alliterative poems and got closer to Book V's alliterative source than W on dozens of occasions all the while attempting to edit out resemblance to that very corpus of poetry.

Conclusion

Each of the examples of alliterative literature in print explored here is, as I have described, exceptional in a number of ways, and in each case the fact that it was printed at all is one notable anomaly. But ultimately, each is also an exception that proves the rule that alliterative poems were not deemed suitable or desirable to early printers; these poems were printed *despite* their alliteration, and the metre seems something to accommodate or perhaps, as with Crowley, even to explain and apologize for. As such, in discovering why these poems were printed we do not always find direct evidence regarding why other alliterative works were not. It is unlikely that any single reason could adequately explain the phenomenon, occurring as it did at a nexus of changing literary tastes, rapid changes in the English language, and technological revolution. And indeed what appeared our best hope for conclusive evidence and a relatively simple explanation, that Caxton's personal tastes and his enormous influence alone account for much of the void, is demonstrably untenable. Much work remains to be done in this area, and each of the test cases I have examined here points to a need for further research on such topics as the interaction of foreign-born printers with regional dialects and linguistic change, and the relationship of the printing of Scottish alliterative verse to that of English. But the evidence gathered here does strongly suggest what some of these reasons were, at least as concerns printing in and around London, as well as how they might have interacted in mutually reinforcing ways. In order to answer the question with which this essay began — why were

[95] Matthews, 'A Question of Texts', p. 84, citing Helen Wroten, 'Malory's Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius Compared with its Source' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, 1950).

poems in the alliterative long line not printed when there was demonstrable interest in them at this time? — it is perhaps most useful to envision the circumstances that worked against their publication in print as a set of filters that acted first to thin the pool of manuscript copies of the poems available to early printers in England, and subsequently to diminish the chances that those works that might have made their way into the hands of these printers in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries would be selected by them for publication.

We must assume, first of all, that timing and geography combined to limit, perhaps rather dramatically, the total number of poems and manuscripts known to printers and easily available in the London-Westminster area even before they first set up their presses. Not only was the Revival a movement whose 'creative force' was 'spent by the mid-fifteenth century', but, as we have seen, those manuscripts with a London connection tend to be from the first half of that century as well, suggesting that the copying of alliterative poetry in London was also on the decline. Thus by 1476 we find a waning movement that has been and continues to be transmitted in manuscript copies produced, more often than not, north and west of the city. Because of this, it seems safe to assume that at least a considerable majority of extant manuscript copies were unavailable to Caxton and his contemporaries and followers.

On its own, though, this explanation is insufficient, as it simply repeats what has been conventional, and often rather uncritical, thinking about the fate of alliterative verse. As Hanna notes, during the past century the dominant 'perception of alliterative poetry as virtually an anti-London form quite simply ignored substantial portions of the evidence' (some of which I have cited).[96] While it certainly seems a reasonable assertion that the composition and copying of alliterative verse was *primarily* something that took place away from London, it is unwarranted to assume that there was an absence of such poetry in the city by the end of the fifteenth century. While there is little doubt that time and geography combined to limit the manuscripts and texts available, it strains the bounds of credibility to suggest either that some of the texts copied in or associated with London, including *Piers Plowman*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, and *St Erkenwald*, were not still known and available in manuscript copies or that some copies of alliterative works produced elsewhere had not, like so many material goods, ideas, and people, gravitated to London.[97] This does not, of course, mean that such

[96] Hanna, 'Alliterative Poetry', p. 510.

[97] Hanna notes that 'London served from at least the early fifteenth century as an êntrepot accepting of literary productions from other locales' ('Alliterative Poetry', p. 511).

books made their way to the hands and scrutiny of Caxton, de Worde, Pynson, and other early printers, but it does mean that we cannot discount such a possibility, and that a suitable explanation for why poems of the Revival were not printed cannot begin and end with assumptions of a virtual void of all such works around London (with, typically, *Piers* being an exception here, as most would agree that Caxton and his contemporaries surely knew of Langland's work).

The evidence gathered here suggests a further set of reasons that any of these poems not removed from consideration by time or geography would likely be deemed unacceptable (or undesirable at the least) to early printers. First, we should keep in mind the fact that most of what Caxton and his contemporaries printed was not English verse — even when we consider only his literary output, much of it is prose and much of it in translation. It should also be acknowledged that many poems written in the long line have been viewed by critics, from the sixteenth century until now, as very poor things indeed. Although we lack any contemporary critical evidence more direct than Chaucer's 'rum, ram, ruf', some of the earliest critical voices we hear are negative; I note above, for example, that George Puttenham took 'little pleasure' in Langland's verse. In his short treatise on Scottish poetry printed in 1584, meanwhile, King James VI does seem to take some pleasure in alliterative verse, which he calls 'Rouncefallis or Tumbling verse', but he suggests that it is best suited for 'flyting, or Inuectives'.[98] And aside from the few acknowledged gems of the Revival, much alliterative verse remains in critical disfavour to this day; consider, for example, the assessments of *Jack Upland* cited above, or George Kane's assertion that Langland 'made the alliterative long line, used with little distinction by most of his contemporaries, into a component of style'.[99] While, as Turville-Petre reminds us, alliteration in one form or another was still being used by poets throughout the sixteenth century, with Spenser even genuflecting 'before the "high steppes" of *Piers Plowman* in the Epilogue to *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579)',[100] it is likely that the slight regard for alliterative verse evidenced by Puttenham and James VI was present well before the written record indicates, and would have influenced printers and their patrons and customers. And, as discussed earlier, even the best of alliterative poetry was increasingly being sidelined in London during the late fifteenth century by a dominant taste for the poetry of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate.

[98] In *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. by G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), I, 223.

[99] Kane, 'William Langland'.

[100] Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 126.

Provided that an alliterative poem was a member of the select group present in manuscript copies in London after 1476 and deemed, if not good, then at least enjoyable or edifying, further conditions worked against its chances of being printed. The frequently archaic language and regional dialects of much alliterative verse must have caused difficulties for printers, especially those born outside of England as so many were, as well as for their customers; it is hard to imagine the language of Cotton Nero A.x *not* causing such difficulties, for example, and we of course have no evidence that these poems, like *Piers Plowman*, circulated in London copies or dialects. Finally, it should be noted that the very heterodoxy that worked in favour of the decision to print works such as *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* or *Jack Upland* in the early days of the English Reformation (a move that was not without considerable risk even then) would have been reason *not* to print them before that time. When all of these things are considered together, only one work in the alliterative long line, *Piers Plowman*, seems clearly to meet all of the criteria — popularity, orthodoxy, availability in multiple manuscripts copied in local dialects, evidence of local copying and readership, sustained appeal and critical reception into the sixteenth century — that would make the text a good candidate for printing. The next closest, intriguingly, would be *The Siege of Jerusalem*, which is only now beginning to emerge from critical neglect and disregard,[101] but which is clearly the work of an accomplished, at times even virtuosic, poet, survives today in more copies than any alliterative poem other than *Piers*, and circulated in London, at least early in the fifteenth century. Beyond that, we find poems in one or two manuscript copies that meet only some, or even none, of these standards. As such, the evidence surrounding the decline of alliterative verse even as printing was on the ascendancy is, like *Piers* itself, 'somewhat darke, but not so harde, but that it may be vnderstande of suche as will not sticke to breake the shell of the nutte for the kernelles sake'.

[101] For a summary of and numerous quotations from such critics, see Bonnie Millar's introduction to *'The Siege of Jerusalem', in its Physical, Literary and Historical Contexts* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000). Studies of the poem show promise of moving beyond this dismissive criticism, however, aided by Ralph Hanna and David Lawton's excellent edition — Early English Text Society, o.s. 320 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) — and exemplified by work such as Elisa Narin van Court, '*The Siege of Jerusalem* and Recuperative Readings', in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. by Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 151–70.