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**SCOTS TAKE THE WHEEL: THE PROBLEM OF PERIOD
AND THE MEDIEVAL SCOTS
ALLITERATIVE THIRTEEN-LINE STANZA**

Andrew W. Klein

No less than other literary critics, the medievalist has become keenly aware of the pitfalls inherent in the arbitrary divisions of our literary periodization.¹ One of the drawbacks to the convenience of periods is precisely that we become too accustomed to thinking in their terms, so that they “become part of the history to which they refer.”² The danger of enshrining period-boundaries in our teaching and research is always that they will lose their sense of arbitrariness. Medievalists, who are now typically called upon to teach a period spanning from 900 to 1700, are in a particularly vulnerable position as we seek to walk the line that simultaneously points to continuities through time while moving across that most frequently fortified division between the “medieval” and the “early modern.”³ Moreover, the boundaries of periodization often bring with them the suggestion of geographic boundaries. For this reason, the influence and effect of English literature is almost always seen as flowing out, across borders, to its British neighbors. So it goes with the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century “Scottish Chaucerians”—among them Henryson, Dunbar, and Douglas—who are seen as imitators of Chaucer, particularly in the adaptation of a prestige literary form, rhyme royal.⁴

¹ Take, for example, a special issue *Rethinking Periodization: Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 37.3 (2007), or two anthologies put out by Blackwell that have sought to blur period boundaries: Elaine Treharne, ed., *Old and Middle English, c. 890-1400*, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2009) and Derek Pearsall, ed., *Chaucer to Spenser*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2008).

² Pearsall, Introduction to *Chaucer to Spenser*, xv.

³ A controversial example of continued support of this division can be found in Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

⁴ For the cultural capital that adopting this form could bring the Scottish poets, see R. James Goldstein, “A Distinction of Poetic Form: What Happened to Rhyme

While there is no use in pretending that the Scottish poets weren't imitating that most revered English poet, the value judgement placed on these authors as "Scottish Chaucerians" on the one hand can limit our appreciation of their own poetic achievements, and on the other it can erect a boundary between Scots and English writers that belies the realities of the intercultural, transnational existence that the Anglo-Scottish border allowed. That is, it makes Scots literature "English," not "Scottish" or "British." Such categorizations establish Chaucer as the apotheosis rather than one remarkable point along the way in a literary history that is better understood as British rather than English.

In what follows, I will point to a Scottish poetic form that has suffered both from our tendency to periodize and from the corollary Anglo-centricism of literary study: the thirteen-line alliterative stanza. This stanza, which takes the form *ababababc₄dddc₂*, proliferated in Scotland in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but its history is rooted in a tradition that stretches back to variant verse forms that first married the four-stress alliterative line (aa/ax) with stanzaic poetry in the thirteenth century.⁵ The verse form is closely allied with the stanza form of the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in that it contains a lengthy initial portion (sometimes called the "frons") before initiating the "wheel" of the poem, a brief, rhyming *cauda* to the stanza. In many of the English variants of this verse form, that "wheel" is preceded by a "bob" of one or two stresses (*abababab₄c₁dddc₂*). Although in *Sir Gawain*, the frons of the poem is written in unrhymed aa/ax lines and the wheel in alternating rhymes, it still bears resemblance to the thirteen-line stanza group in its alliteration and reliance on the bob-and-wheel as an anchor of sorts that brings the stanza to its conclusion. The connection between this early and unique form of the bob-and-wheel stanza and the later Scottish poems may not initially be clear because the effects of a long history of periodization has separated the two by both time and place in a way that obscures their relationship and posits *Sir Gawain* as, in a similar fashion to Chaucer's rhyme royal, the culmination of the alliterative stanza during the so-called "alliterative revival." Despite their separation, the Scottish poems and

Royal in Scotland?," in *The Anglo-Scottish Border and the Shaping of Identity*, ed. Mark P. Bruce and Katherine H. Terrell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 161-80.

⁵ See, for instance, the famed Harley manuscript (British Library Harley MS 2253) which contains many variations of alliterative stanzaic poetry; see Susanna Greer Fien, "The Early Thirteen-Line Stanza: Style and Metrics Reconsidered," *Parergon* 18.1 (2000): 97-126; Thorlac Turville-Petre, "'Summer Sunday,' 'De Tribus Regibus Mortuis,' and 'The Awntyrs off Arthure': Three Poems in the Thirteen-Line Tradition," *Review of English Studies* 25.97 (1974): 1-14.

SGGK have in common both formal and thematic qualities that can usefully be read together.

A few excellent Scottish poems of this form are the early fifteenth-century *Awntyrs off Arthure*, the late fifteenth-century poem *Sir Gologras and Gawain*, and the sixteenth-century poem *Rauf Collier*.⁶ Of these chivalric romances, *Awntyrs* is written in a northwestern English dialect, but has been persuasively argued to be of Scottish origin, not least because of its verse form.⁷ All three of these poems are written in the alliterative thirteen-line stanza form *ababababc₄dddc₂*. Not only do they bear a formal resemblance, but the poems demonstrate an impressive command of difficult prosody and relate exciting narratives with energy and style. They are impressive pieces, the equal in many respects to the alliterative masterpieces that had come a century or more earlier from England. An exemplary verse can be seen below, where the lord Gologras responds to Gawain's request that the lord become Arthur's vassal:

Than said the syre of the sail with sad sembland
 I thank your gracious grete lord and his gude wil
 Had neuer leid of this land that had bene leuand
 Maid ony feute before freik to fulfil
 I suld sickirly myself be consentand
 And seik to your souerane seymly on syll
 Sen hail our doughty elderis has bene endurand
 Thriuandly in this thede vnchargit as thril
 If I for obeisance or boist to bondage me bynde
 I war wourthy to be
 Hingit heigh on ane tre To waif with ye wynd
 That ilk creature might se (ll. 428-40).⁸

The masterful way in which the tension is built out over Gologras's response, carried through with the strong alliteration that frequently continues onto a fourth stress, adds to the gravitas of the speaker. Gologras courteously, yet with solemnity, flatters Arthur with thanks before explaining that his land has never been subject to any king or he would happily oblige. But, upholding the tradition of his elders, Gologras

⁶ There are others, and some well-known, such as Holland's *The Buke of the Howlat*, as well as poems by Dunbar, Douglas, and Henryson. For a list, though dated, see Turville-Petre, "Three Poems," 13-14.

⁷ See Ralph Hanna III, ed., *The Knightly Tale of Gologros and Gawane*, STS, 5th series, 7 (Woodbridge, 2008), xxv-xxx and xxxv-xxxviii, in which Hanna has proposed, on linguistic and topological grounds at least, a Scots provenance for the *Awntyrs*.

⁸ Transcription from the Chepman and Myllar printed text (1508), National Library of Scotland, available online: *Gologrus and Gawain, with John Lydgate: Rhyme without Accord, First Scottish Books, item 2, f.19* (accessed 20 November 2016): <http://digital.nls.uk/firstscottishbooks/page.cfm?folio=19>.

describes vividly, with the snap of the *c* line initiating the wheel of the stanza, how he would be worthy to be hanged should he forfeit his independence.

Despite such impressive achievements in imagery, metrics, and structure and, indeed, despite having attained a more extensive readership than *Sir Gawain* in the middle ages, for most readers of medieval literature written in the British Isles, these poems have slipped through the cracks.⁹ These fault lines have appeared in literary history largely because of the effects of periodization, a periodization structured along imagining the history of English literature rather than of British literature which thus sees its literary forms becoming *passé* well before they had reached their zenith. These examples of the Scottish thirteen-line alliterative stanza featuring its distinctive *unbobbed* wheel stand at the end of the form's development, but typical periodization sees them as early modern productions – well beyond the usual arbitrary cut-off date of *ca.* 1500 for the “late middle ages.” This has meant that the texts are neither studied by many medievalists nor, because of their clear indebtedness to a medieval tradition, studied by those who work on the early modern period. In fact, the best work on the thirteen-line stanza, by Fein and Turville-Petre, excuses itself from considering the Scots work in favor of that from the fourteenth century, which is tantamount to re-centering the achievements of the later Scots poets on the achievements of their English precursors. Of course, it is true that Scots literature developed its version of the thirteen-line stanza after its success in England, but glossing over its successes in Scotland gives the impression that the form was petering out. Far from it: while we have only five or six thirteen-line alliterative stanza poems in fourteenth-century England, excluding the dramas, we have more than twice that many examples in Scotland in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.¹⁰

More than just providing an incomplete picture of a fine strain of British literary history, however, periodization has in some cases stymied our ability to see comparative themes. Only very recently have scholars pointed to the potential connection between the Scots romances *Gologras* and *Rauf Collier* with the *Awntyrs*, now potentially a Scottish poem, and fewer still have seen to bring *Sir Gawain* into dialogue with them.¹¹ Aside

⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* survives in only one manuscript (British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x) from the late fourteenth century while these thirteen-line stanza poems survive in multiple manuscripts or incunabula.

¹⁰ Depending on consideration of *Awntyrs* as English or Scottish.

¹¹ Most recently, Patricia Clare Ingham, “The Trouble with Britain,” *postmedieval* 7.4 (2016): 484-96; and see also Randy P. Schiff, *Revivalist Fantasy: Alliterative Verse and National Literary History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press). On *SGGK* see Lynn Arner, “The Ends of Enchantment: Colonialism and *Sir Gawain*

from prominently featuring Sir Gawain, what these texts all share is a concern with sovereignty and the effects of colonialism—*Sir Gawain* with Anglo-Welsh border identities and *Gologras, Rauf*, and *Awntyrs* with Anglo-Scottish ones. Reading these texts outside of the confines of “English literature” and instead from the perspective of “Scottish literature,” they reveal not the dwindling of an English literary form but the perfection of a Scottish form, adapted (even appropriated and abrogated) from the English with the “bob” line done away with to explore moments of Anglo-Scottish encounter. Not unlike the ways in which alliterative revival texts of fourteenth-century England are thought to reflect a consistent theme of political discontent, these thirteen-line alliterative stanza poems are fraught with concerns over sovereignty.

These thematic connections indicate that we might approach the study of medieval Scottish literature through a lens that allows for the slippage of an incredibly unstable border and a permeability between northern, *regional* cultures. Among its other problems, periodization creates a false sense of fossilization around national boundaries. But the fluctuating medieval Anglo-Scottish border and its inhabitants demonstrate that the concerns at the heart of many of these thirteen-line stanza poems are particular to a region primed for negotiating conflicts of flexible political and national identity. *Gologras, Rauf*, and *Awntyrs* arise from the Anglo-Scottish borderlands; *Sir Gawain*, too, is thought to be of northern provenance.¹²

The comparison between *Sir Gawain* and these later developments can also bring us to a better appreciation not just of the important themes and ingenious prosody, but of the ways of reading these texts. The famed “bob-and-wheel” of *Sir Gawain* has recently been scrutinized as a misunderstood literary device—the bob’s placement hovering in the margins of its manuscript has determined that the process of reading *Sir Gawain* is meant to be a more fluid and reader-engaging activity. The bob, because of its ambiguous position, could be read after any number of lines in the stanza preceding the wheel.¹³ There is an analogous activity

and the *Green Knight*,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 48.2 (2006): 79-101; Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Rhonda Knight, “All Dressed Up with Someplace to Go: Regional Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 25 (2003): 259-84.

¹² The provenance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* itself remains contested, but several recent authorities argue that its sole manuscript, at least, is from York; see, e.g., Joel Fredell, “The Pearl-Poet Manuscript in York,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 36.1 (2014): 1-39.

¹³ See Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Maidie Hilmo, and Linda Olson, *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches* (Ithaca, 2011), 56-64;

suggested in the layout of the thirteen-line stanza, in both English and Scots exemplars. The texts for *Awntyrs*, *Rauf*, and *Gologras* are either written or printed as above, with the final line of the wheel positioned marginally to the right of the three wheel lines. In manuscripts of the *Awntyrs*, these three lines are joined to the final “c” rhyme by means of a three-pronged bracket; in the early prints of both *Gologras* (1508) and *Rauf* (1572), there are no brackets, but the positioning of the final “c” line achieves the same effect. The result is striking for the reader: as the eye is drawn across the page to the final line with each rhyme of the wheel, the repetition can either emphasize or comment on each line in the same fashion as that moveable bob in *Sir Gawain*. In the above-quoted stanza, for instance, the dramatic effect of the image of the noble Gologras’s corpse waving “with ye wind” is first implied (“I war wourthy to be ... to waif with ye wind”), then chillingly confirmed (“Hingit heigh on ane tre ... to waif with ye wind”), and finally panoramically imagined by the dispersal of perspective to those people for whom the noble is responsible (“That ilk creature might se ... to waif with ye wind”). Reading the poem like this is suggested by the form’s literary history, connected to a manuscript *mise en page* tradition that has only recently come to light in studies of *Sir Gawain*. Yet William Caxton began removing this feature of poetic layout, while the Scottish prints of Chepman and Myllar preserve the wheel with its marginal final line.¹⁴

The preceding might give the impression that I am arguing for the inclusion of Scots literature in the “English” canon via a breakdown of period and geographic boundaries, but I would prefer something like the opposite. Medieval “Scottish literature” needs to be recognized as the ingenious and original contribution to literary culture in the British Isles that it is. While poems akin to the three mentioned here might be found south of the border, the Scottish texts are nonetheless unique in their mastery of the *ababababc₄dddc₂* style. Where, however, are students most likely to encounter these texts except in the English classroom? A shift to seeing literature from both Scotland and England as more explicitly “British” might help decenter the English from our appraisal of medieval

Kerby-Fulton and Andrew W. Klein, “Rhymed Alliterative Verse in *Mise en page* Transition: Two Case Studies in English Poetic Hybridity,” in *The Medieval Literary beyond Form*, ed. Catherine Sanok and Robert J. Meyer-Lee (Boydell and Brewer, *forthcoming*).

¹⁴ See William Caxton’s first printing of *The Canterbury Tales* (1476), in which he removes the marginalization of tail-rhymes and bobs for “The Tale of Sir Thopas.” Caxton’s successor, Wynkyn de Worde (1498), would restore the marginal tail-rhyme positioning, but not the positioning of the bobs, effectively initiating the death of the bob in English literature.

Scots literature, and suggests that we might structure survey courses along regional clusters in Britain rather than by periods and English literary movements. A glance at the most commonly used anthology of “English” literature can confirm the Anglo-centricism with which Scottish authors have been received. The sole example of Scots in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*’s “The Middle Ages” volume is Henryson’s “The Cock and the Fox,” and Henryson is introduced by a headnote focused on his merits relative to Chaucer; there are no Scottish authors included in the anthology’s seventeenth-century selections.¹⁵ It is a strange irony, then, that the traditional “BritLit” survey course most frequently relies on an “EngLit” anthology. To pass silently over the connections between English and Scottish literature, separated by “period” perhaps but no less closely allied for it, is to reduce the multiple trajectories of British literary history, to silence the tensions regarding imperialism and sovereignty motivating literary production, and to miss out on the fruitful circulation of non-Chaucerian literary techniques such as the stanza-form discussed here for which the Scots should be widely known.

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¹⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *et al.*, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th ed., vols. A and B (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).