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Alliterative Proverbs in Medieval England: Language Choice and Literary Meaning. By Susan E. Deskis. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2016. Pp. 163.

This is a welcome, noteworthy study of selected alliterative proverbs documented in Old and Middle English (and in some cases beyond). Clearly alliterative proverbs only represent a subset of all such largely but by no means exclusively folksy expressions, but their cultural connections to Old English, indeed Germanic poetics, makes them especially interesting. Deskis suggests by implication that the rhetorical use of alliteration in any text is worthy of our consideration. Inherently interdisciplinary in nature, paremiological investigation explores interrelationships with literature, history, sociology, folklore study, and, in its true sense, philology (or, per the subtitle, “literary meaning”).

Drawing on terminology derived from Einar Haugen, Deskis refers repeatedly to the “ecology” of language, an analytical framework I think adequately and perhaps more accurately covered in the given context under linguistic “pragmatics”; in simple terms: Who uses what [language, rhetorical device] when under which circumstances, and why? In the introduction, Deskis insightfully discusses the issues relevant to the identification of proverbs, the history of the English alliterative tradition (or traditions), and the cultural ramifications of the Norman Conquest, especially the multicultural, multilingual setting in which most authors worked: English, French, and Latin (hence, also in the subtitle, “language choice”).

The three central chapters analyze various proverbs in some detail. Chapter 2 traces eleven proverbs (or proverbial expressions, such as, “The apple of one's eye”) that carry forth into Middle English collocations from Old English. There follow discussions of twelve examples using Germanic vocabulary (a later

but popular one is, “Look before you leap”), and six employing Romance vocabulary, both sets without Old English parallels. Germanic and Romance lexicons differ noticeably in how alliteration functions (German has the option of distinguishing using 'Stabreim' for 'alliteration in the Germanic poetic tradition'). Most significantly, only semantically *and* phonetically stressed elements can 'stave rhyme'. Thus, “words and wind”, “will and wit”, “poetry and prose”, or 'law and literature” all alliterate distinctly from “modern and medieval” or “literary and linguistic” (all examples in Deskis' text). The proverbs chosen for this study that employ Romance vocabulary all display root stress, but, as the examples cited above show, this is not always the case (consider, too, the 'three R's' “reading, writing, and 'rithmetic”, demonstrating Germanic as opposed to Romance alliteration).

The two chapters to follow address various genres: didactic texts (Ch. 3) and romance, lyric and drama (Ch. 4.). Chapter 5 concludes with a modern, not a strictly Germanic alliterating word pair: Summary and Suggestions. The documentation of old proverbs is, of course, subject to the limited written sources available, so a proverb may be much older than its recorded history. Parallels in other related languages may point to pre-historic origins, unless the case for separate but similar evolution can be made. From the didactic texts (Ch. 3) Deskis excerpts from proverb collections, gnomic poems, devotional prose, a Latin ethnographic travelogue (with specific mention of alliteration), and sermons. Five romances are treated: *Gamelyn* being the most productive for alliterating proverbs, then *Sir Firumbras*, *Tale of Beryn*, *Floris and Blancefleur*, and, finally, *Generydes*. Popular romance employs, as culturally conservative elements, alliterative proverbs much more often than courtly tales. Within lyrical poetry, alliterative proverbial expressions, when they do appear, serve to assert a sense of Englishness. In both poetry and drama, the voices using alliterating proverbs appeal to the audience via a chosen character, most often in a less overtly didactic manner. Summing up, Deskis senses a continuum of references to the traditions represented by the durable alliterating proverb, evidenced in an impressive range of genres. Deskis deftly demonstrates the various elocutionary functions proverbs exhibit.

I offer here a few remarks suggesting another look at the one or other issue. Our own, modern views of code-switching, not at all unusual in the multilingual European milieu (but see p. 12: “unexpected,” “somewhat unusually,” or p. 92: “curious”), may lead to conclusions other than might have been drawn in earlier times. For one proverb, “Old sin makes new shame,” alliteration in the Germanic tradition is in fact not present, since [s] is not the same phoneme as [ʃ]. For “Better is List than lither strength,” a reference to Prov. 24.5: “vir sapiens fortis est / A wise man is strong” (see also Prov. 21.22) would be useful, even if the Biblical passage is without alliteration. This proverb – as recorded in *Lazamon* – was listed by Walter W. Skeat, *Early English Proverbs: Chiefly of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. With Illustrative Quotations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), p. 5; on the same page appears another early English alliterating proverb, “Æuere me æhte wisne mon / Wurthliche igreten,” itself derived from a Biblical verse rich in alliteration: “Coram cano capite consurge, et honora personam senis [...]” (Lev. 19.32); two pages further on in Skeat, also from *Lazamon*, “for god is grith, and god is frith” (*ibid.*, 7). While Skeat (not included in Deskis) does not appear to be interested in alliteration in his broadly conceived compendium, there are more such proverbs to be mined there.

Deskis's nonetheless impressive bibliography with some 400 entries (a few are duplicates) is reflected in nearly 600 footnotes. This tome is carefully indexed. Especially welcome is a separate index to the proverbs – 54 in total – included in this study. For most of these items, a cross-reference is included to Bartlett Jere Whiting's standard compilation *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly before 1500* (1968). More recently, paremiologists can turn to the monumental *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi: Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters* (1995-2002); see also Wolfgang Mieder's four detailed reviews, collected in his “Nieman hât ân arebeit wîstuom”: *Sprichwörtliches in mittelhochdeutschen Epen*, 2009, 105-151; in the meantime, an exemplary collection of proverbs and proverbial sayings in medieval German courtly literature has appeared, the appearance of which Mieder (p. 143) had awaited: *Handbuch der Sentenzen und Sprichwörter im höfischen Roman des 12. und 13. Jahrhun-*

derts, 2 vols., eds. Manfred Eikelmann / Thomas Tomasek, Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter, 2013, Berlin / New York: De Gruyter, 2009; see my review in *Mediaevistik* 26 [2013], 362-7. Deskis might have enjoyed E. G. Stanley's "Two Old English Poetic Phrases Insufficiently Understood for Literary Criticism: *þing gehegan and seonþ gehegan*," in *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, ed. Daniel G. Calder. Contributions of the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies 10 (Berkeley: UCLA Pr., 1977), 67-90.

Throughout, Deskis stresses the important insight that the body of proverbs, like all language, is comprised of a blend of received tradition and adaptation, of the old and the new. We can look forward both to further research on English proverbs, alliterating or no, and studies on connections revealed in proverbs and proverbial expressions across Europe (and perhaps beyond; see Fionnuala Carson Williams, "Alliteration in English-Language Versions of Current Widespread European Idioms and Proverbs," in Jonathan Roper, ed., *Alliteration in Culture*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 34-44, with a mention of Middle English proverbs, p. 35, and estimates of the frequency of alliteration in proverbs from various languages, p. 40f.) within the various remnants of cultural heritage. There remains much to be done, and studies such as this one by Deskis can show how careful philological work can proceed productively, leading to more comprehensive catalogues of proverbs and other rhetorical devices.

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