

Vowel Alliteration in the Old Germanic Languages by E. Classen

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## REVIEWS.

*Vowel Alliteration in the Old Germanic Languages.* By E. CLASSEN  
(University of Manchester Publications, Germanic Series No. 1.)  
Manchester: University Press. 1913. 8vo. xvi + 91 pp.

In this short but scholarly study we have a critical discussion of one of the vexed questions in Old Germanic metric, viz., why it is that while only like consonants alliterate with one another, any one vowel may alliterate with any other. Real alliteration of entirely different vowels is of course an impossibility. The very term alliteration presupposes some element of similarity between the alliterating sounds, and from the days of Rapp onwards various theories have been advanced as to what this element of similarity may be.

The earliest explanatory theory was that commonly known as the glottal-catch theory which said that the element of similarity consisted in the fact that all initial vowels alike in the Old Germanic languages began with a well-marked glottal catch, sufficiently strong to make them alliterate one with another. The theory of a universal glottal catch in the Old Germanic languages is non-proven, and perhaps must always remain so for lack of evidence for or against it. The two chief points which the writer of this study makes against it are that it is difficult to see how the glottal catch could have sufficient phonetic distinctness to be used for alliterative purposes by men of the average degree of phonetic consciousness, and if it really had a highly distinctive quality why did it not receive the honour of a separate symbol like the Hebrew and Arabic *spiritus lenis*? The second theory is that first advanced by Jiriczek, viz., that all vowels alike have a certain sonority which distinguishes them from consonants, and that this element of sonority marks them off sufficiently definitely for any one vowel to be allowed to alliterate with any other vowel by reason of its distinctive sonority. Mr Classen here shows that the theory again breaks down because we can hardly imagine the average man to have sufficient phonetic consciousness to feel that there was any greater phonetic similarity between the vowels *i* and *a* than between the consonants *b* and *p*, indeed the similarity is acoustic rather than phonetic.

The third theory is that advanced by the Swedish scholar Axel Kock, viz., that alliterating vowels were originally identical just as alliterating consonants are, but that the vowels were more subject to phonetic change, and that as a result we get first traditional alliterations, i.e., alliterations which were once true but are so no longer, and then, under

the influence of these traditional alliterations, fresh alliterations of vowels which have never been identical. At the same time new identical alliterations between vowels once different but now similar (owing to phonetic change) will arise. It is chiefly in support of this theory that the present study has been written, and Mr Classen makes an elaborate study of practically all those lines of *Beowulf* which show vowel-alliteration, of four poems from the *Edda* and of some 1400 lines of the *Heliand*, with a view to testing the theory. The work has been done with great thoroughness and accuracy, and the results are favourable to the theory, but there are admittedly several factors which make an exact determination of percentages impossible. Chief among them is the impossibility of determining whether one of the three alliterating vowels may be the result of accident. The one result which stands out clear beyond the possibility of doubt is that there always was a preference for identical vowels in the old alliterative poetry, a view entirely opposed to that commonly taken.

With regard to the theory, as a whole, two criticisms may be offered. First, the whole theory is largely dependent on the question of how far we can believe the phraseology of Germanic poetry to have been traditional from the days when the vowels existed in their Primitive Germanic form, for it is clear that none of our poems goes back in any shape or form to a period anything like as early as that. Making every allowance for the evidence for the existence of Germanic poetry from the earliest times and for the similarity of phrasing which exists between the poetry of the various Germanic tongues it does not seem that there could have been a sufficient body of traditional poetic phraseology to justify the large number of purely traditional alliterative rhymes which are to be found in the earliest monuments. Secondly, the theory of original identity is supported by the quotation of certain lines containing what the author calls 'approximately identical' vowels. Thus any vowel in the series *a-æ-e-i* may be considered identical with its immediate neighbour for purposes of alliteration, i.e., *a* may alliterate with *æ* and *æ* with *e*. This seems to assume too high a degree of phonetic consciousness; when once you depart from the principle of absolute identity the untrained ear would probably see no more reason for alliterating *a* with *æ* than with *e*. If you once allow any margin of difference, why should you not go on and alliterate such sounds as *b* and *p*?

One piece of evidence in support of their theory seems to have been overlooked by the upholders of the identity theory, viz., the existence of traditional consonant alliteration in the case of the two sounds represented by each of the symbols *c* and *g*. Here the traditional alliteration was maintained after the sounds had developed into both velar and palatal forms.

One slight defect in the book must be mentioned. The somewhat lengthy passages quoted in the Introduction from various German writers on metric should have been translated in the same way as the passage from the Swedish of Axel Kock is. There are unfortunately

many students of Old English poetry, who are not familiar with German, and it is a pity that they should be debarred from a full understanding of a book which is full of interest for them.

ALLEN MAWER.

NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE.

*A Phonetic Dictionary of the English Language.* By HERMANN MICHAELIS and DANIEL JONES. Hanover: Carl Meyer. 1913. 8vo. 450 pp.

This is a work of four hundred and fifty pages or so, very clearly printed, in double columns. The ordinary words of the English vocabulary, and many others, are set down in the script of the Association Phonétique, so as to indicate, as exactly as may be, the received pronunciation. Thus the book should be useful to foreigners and others who, for one reason or another, are ignorant of the pronunciation of Standard English. The only drawback is, that many persons will probably be unable to find the word they want; not because it is not in the book, for the vocabulary is copious enough, but because the words are entered under the phonetic spelling, the ordinary spelling being given after this. This means that the reader must first be very familiar with the notation used, and next must know the pronunciation of the word, at least with close approximation, before he can find it. If he knows it, why should he take the trouble to look it up? Personally, I had no difficulty in finding any word I sought, but then I am not altogether unused to the various methods known as phonetic notation, whereby the appearance of words is disguised. For practical purposes, would it not have been better to put the ordinary spelling first?

One praiseworthy feature of the book is that the pronunciation of a large number of proper names is given, including many family names. Another good point is that in the case of all words the pronunciations given, so far as I have been able to test, by taking a good many crucial words, and by reading through many consecutive pages in various parts of the book, are really those in use among good speakers, and not fanciful, bogus concoctions. If such a book as this was really wanted, in spite of the innumerable other dictionaries, published here and abroad, giving the pronunciation of English, then this is a good and useful book of its kind, apart from the practical drawback noted above.

It were much to be wished that foreign publishers would stick, or sew, or rivet the pages of their books together, in such a way that they do not tumble to pieces on being opened. The copy before me has paper covers, and a good shake would reduce it, I suppose, to several dozen bits. A cloth-bound copy, on the other hand, which I owe to the generosity of the publisher, is quite strongly fastened together. As the latter only costs one mark more than the flimsy paper copy, I strongly recommend intending purchasers to get the book in its bound form.

There are a few remarks on a different subject of a rather laughable character, which I should like to make before closing this short notice.