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Regulating the stereomicrostructure, circularity and functionality of synthetic PHAs

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Biodegradable plastics, especially those that can biodegrade in uncontrolled environments, are of importance to help curb the global plastics crisis. Poly(3-hydroxyalkanoate)s (PHAs), which can be either microbially or chemically synthesized, are one of the rare classes of plastics that can biodegrade under both managed and unmanaged conditions. Besides this exceptional upside, PHAs can also be tuned to exhibit thermal, mechanical, and optical properties of commodity polymers including polyolefins, and they can be designed to be chemically recyclable towards a circular PHA economy or functionalized to acquire additional, diverse and/or improved properties. To enable such modularity in chemocatalytic PHAs, the development of stereoselective and controlled molecular catalysts, as well as the design of monomer structures and polymerization processes, is of primary importance. In this context, this Perspective article focuses on three recent advancements, including PHA stereomicrostructural engineering, melt-processability and chemical recyclability, and chemical functionalization.

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Introduction

Recently, especially within the past decade, research has focused heavily on searching for practical solutions to addressing the global plastics crisis.^{1–4} Typical strategies aim to increase mechanical recycling rates, valorize waste plastics, design chemically recyclable polymers, or develop biodegradable plastics.^{5–13} The development of biodegradable plastics represents an important part of this large effort to combat the plastics problem, especially concerning end-of-life issues and environmental protection. This becomes particularly important for application areas where plastics recovery, recycling, or reuse is highly challenging or nearly impractical.

Amongst many biodegradable plastics reported in the literature, the plastics belonging to the large family of poly(3-hydroxyalkanoate)s (PHAs)^{14–19} are most unique, thanks to their distinct ability to biodegrade in both managed (industrial and home composting) and unmanaged (ocean, freshwater, and soil) environments,²⁰ as well as their largely tunable material properties.²¹ The biological fermentation route to PHAs is recognized for its ability to take various inputs of biorenewable sources (biomass, fatty acids, plant oils, *etc.*) and produce stereoperfect (*R*)-PHAs that typically exhibit high molar mass,

high melting points, and strong mechanical properties.^{21–24} The simplest, most important member in the large PHA family is poly(3-hydroxybutyrate) (P3HB), with the methyl as the side-chain group or exocyclic substituent. A variety of PHA copolymers of P3HB incorporating other short, medium, or long side-chain length moieties can be biologically produced, depending on the growth conditions and feed substrates.^{15,21,25,26}

As these materials are stereoperfect with pure (*R*) stereoconfigurations on the backbone stereogenic centers, they are highly crystalline, especially for short-chain PHAs such as P3HB and poly(3-hydroxyvalerate) (P3HV), imparting these PHAs with high ultimate tensile strength (σ_B) and melting temperature (T_m) values but also detrimentally making such PHAs extremely brittle, with negligible fracture strain properties or elongation at break (ϵ_B) of $\sim 3\%$.¹⁵ Currently, varying the stereochemistry of PHAs biologically presents a daunting challenge;²⁷ thus, the modulation of material properties of biological PHAs is confined to the copolymer composition, which is typically limited by the functional group tolerance of the bacteria or enzymes.

In contrast to the biological route to PHAs, the chemocatalytic route allows for modulation of the PHA stereochemistry through catalyst-controlled stereoselective polymerization processes, termed stereomicrostructural engineering.^{14,28–30} Accessing these stereodiverse and functionalized PHAs requires the implementation of advanced molecular catalysts that can regulate the polymerization stereochemistry and tolerate monomer functionality. Herein, we highlight recent

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Fig. 1 Overview of PHAs, including biological and chemocatalytic routes, stereomicrostructural engineering, and functionalization of PHAs.

advances in the synthesis of stereodiverse and functionalized PHAs utilizing molecular catalysts, as well as thermally robust and chemically recyclable PHAs through monomer design (Fig. 1). We conclude this Perspective by laying out our vision for the future of PHAs, including critical issues that must be addressed to facilitate broader implementation of PHAs in the marketplace.

Stereomicrostructural engineering of PHAs

For decades, one of the major goals in the chemocatalytic routes to PHAs was to synthesize biomimetic stereoperfect (*sp*) isotactic (*it*)-P3HB (characterized as having a probability of *meso* diads, $P_m > 0.99$, and a percentage of *meso* triads, [mm] > 99%) as this P3HB exhibits an *it*-polypropylene (PP)-like melting temperature ($T_m \sim 175$ °C) and desirable tensile strength ($\sigma_B \sim 30$ MPa). As compared to the biological route to *it*-P3HB, which has slow kinetics and yields materials with high dispersity ($D > 2.0$) due to its nature of step-growth polymerization (SGP), the chemocatalytic route to P3HB *via* ring-opening polymerization (ROP) typically has fast kinetics, affords P3HB with low D (as low as 1.01) due to its nature of chain-growth polymerization, and is more scalable and cost-effective. In 2018, Chen and Tang reported the first instance of biomimetic *sp-it*-P3HB through the ROP of the *racemic* eight-membered dimethyl diolide (*rac*-8DL^{Me}) with yttrium catalyst **1** (Fig. 2).³¹ The catalyst system used in this work was also found

to perform kinetic resolution on *rac*-8DL^{Me}. Recently, Coates and coworkers have also developed a bimetallic magnesium catalyst system, which performs kinetic resolution of *rac*- β -butyrolactone (*rac*-BBL) with stereoinversion of the polymerized monomer and results in *it*-P3HB with $P_m = 98\%$, the highest isotacticity achieved in the ROP of *rac*-BBL to date.³² Notably, this catalyst system does not perform well in polymerizing (*S*)- or (*R*)-BBL as it was determined that the opposite enantiomer activates the chiral catalyst to perform the kinetic resolution.

Work towards the goal of stereoperfection has also been carried out through the polymerization of *rac*-BBL using **8**³³ and **9**³⁴ as well as towards *sp* syndiotactic (*st*) P3HB using **7** (characterized as having a probability of *racemic* diads, $P_r > 0.99$, and percentage of *racemic* triads, [rr] > 99%).³⁵ These works, along with the pioneering report of Carpentier and coworkers, which showed that *st*-P3HB with $P_r = 0.94$ can be produced by the ROP of *rac*-BBL with yttrium catalysts incorporating the tetradentate alkoxy-amino-bis(phenolate) ligand (**11**, **12**),^{36,37} have advanced our understanding of catalyst structure–polymer stereomicrostructure relationships, more specifically how molecular catalysts use their symmetry as well as steric and electronic effects to control stereomicrostructures of P3HB materials. Even though these contributions are notable, they still do not solve the problem of *sp*-P3HB's brittleness as both *it*- and *st*-P3HB are highly crystalline and extremely brittle. Further catalyst development has been necessary to solve this brittleness issue and enhance the mechanical toughness.



Fig. 2 Structures of representative molecular catalysts for ROP engineering of PHA stereomicrostructures.

An abundance of work has also been focused on creating new molecular catalysts, both metallic and organic types, for the ROP of BBL.¹⁴ Typically, these catalysts impart some stereocontrol but lead to materials with long or very short segments of stereoperfect regions, which either impart a high degree of crystallinity, making the material brittle, or lead to mostly amorphous softer materials. Recently, Reiger and coworkers developed an *in situ* generated yttrium catalyst system (8), which yields iso-rich *ir*-P3HB. Although its isotacticity and T_m are only moderately high (P_m up to 0.89, T_m up to 154 °C), it exhibits good mechanical properties with $\sigma_B = 21.1$ MPa and $\epsilon_B = 392\%$ ($P_m = 0.84$).³³ Robinson and coworkers developed a dual catalysis approach to generate stereoblock *it-b*-atactic (*at*) P3HB through irreversible chain transfer ROP of *rac*-BBL with sequential addition of yttrium and zinc complexes.³⁸ Chen and coworkers previously reported the synthesis of *it-b-st* P3HB from the diastereoselective polymerization of a mixture of *rac*-8DL^{Me} and *meso*-8DL^{Me}.³⁹

To confer polyolefin-like properties to P3HB without employing the copolymerization strategy,⁴⁰ which does not conform to the mono-material design principle,⁴¹ the diolide monomer platform needs to be implemented. In 2023, Chen and coworkers showed that installation of controlled stereodeflects into P3HB through the ROP of *meso*-8DL^{Me} with a commercially available lanthanum catalyst (6) leads to syndio-rich *sr*-P3HB ($P_r = 0.77$, no $[mm]$ triads due to the structure of *meso*-8DL^{Me}), which exhibits a high fracture strain ($\epsilon_B > 400\%$), high tensile strength ($\sigma_B = 34$ MPa), excellent toughness ($U_T = 96$ MJ m⁻³), high optical clarity, and a large processing window (difference between T_m and degradation temperature, T_d , of 141 °C).²⁸ Furthering this work, high-molar-mass *ir*- and *sr*-P3HB synthesized using the diolide platform and complex 2 or 3 resulted in ultra-tough and ductile ($\epsilon_B > 800\%$) materials with excellent optical clarity.⁴² Blending these chemocatalytic P3HB materials with biological *sp*-P3HB gave new P3HB materials with synergistic thermal and mechanical properties. However, when the *ir*-P3HB obtained from the ROP of *rac*-BBL was blended with bio-P3HB, enhanced properties were not observed, emphasizing the necessity of synthesizing P3HB

from *rac*-8DL^{Me} for enhancing toughness of bio-P3HB as well as T_m and modulus of *ir*- and *sr*-P3HB.⁴²

This stereomicrostructural engineering work has been mainly focused on P3HB, but other PHAs have also been synthesized with diverse stereomicrostructures. For example, P3HV has been synthesized from both 8DL^{Et} and β -valerolactone (BVL) with *sr*, *ir*, and intermediate *st* and *it* stereomicrostructures.^{40,43} Increasing the length of the alkyl chain provides access to a wider range of thermal and mechanical properties, such as decreased glass transition temperature (T_g) below -30 °C, enabling packaging applications in cold environments. Again, these stereomicrostructures were imparted by the catalyst used, which has also been shown for PHAs with longer alkyl substituents, aryl substituents, more elaborate substituents, and (alternating) copolymers.^{14,40,44,45} In an effort to expand the scope of PHAs, stereoselective polymerization of *racemic* β -thiobutyrolactone (*rac*-TBL) generated sulfurated PHA poly(3-thiobutyrolactone) (P3TB).⁴⁶ Increasing the ionic radius ($S > O$) by utilizing a thiolactone monomer enabled access to topologically diverse, stereocontrolled cyclic *st*- and *it*-P3TB using various catalysts (6, 12, etc.).^{46,47}

Tuning the properties of PHAs by regulating their stereomicrostructure is a developed field that is still fast growing. There is still a wealth of knowledge to be gained in this space by further tuning the catalyst and monomer structures and their close covalent- and/or non-covalent interactions during the ROP process. Furthermore, there are application spaces that need to be explored for these stereodiverse PHAs.

Thermally robust and chemically recyclable PHAs

One of the major pitfalls of semi-crystalline *it*-PHAs is their propensity to degrade ($T_{d5\%} \sim 250$ °C) near their T_m or in melt (*i.e.*, lack of melt-processability) due to the facile *cis*-elimination enabled by the presence of reactive α -hydrogens. Four

18i) resulted in *sr*- to *st*-PHAs with $P_r = 0.81$ – 0.90 across all monomers, while chlorine groups (**18d**, **18f**) yielded *ir*- to *it*-PHAs with $P_m = 0.90$ – 0.93 . Some of these PHAs are semicrystalline; for example, *sr*-P3HB^{CH₂OAllyl} ($P_r = 0.81$) showed a T_m of 85 °C, and *sr*-P3HB^{CH₂OMe} ($P_r = 0.81$) displayed a T_m of 116 °C. These improved thermal properties may imply their potential utility in packaging applications and warrant further characterization of their tensile properties, if increased molar masses above their entanglement molecular weights can be reached.

Follow-up studies that expanded the range of stereoregular P3HB^{CH₂OR} materials through the use of different pendant groups concluded that the methylene hydrogens on the pendant exocyclic substituent have non-covalent interactions with the ligands of catalysts **18f**, **18g**, **18i** and **18l**, which dictate whether tactic functionalized P3HB materials are formed or not (Fig. 4).^{75–77} This finding was further confirmed in a subsequent report, where a BPL with the pendant group –CH₂OCF₂CHF₂ was polymerized with **18b**, **18f**, and **18g** to produce *st*-PHA (P_r up to 0.87) and *at*-PHA using **18l**, demonstrating stereoselectivity trends based on the *ortho* and *para* substituent identities in the ligand backbone alongside non-covalent interactions with the monomer exocyclic group.⁷⁸ The continued mechanistic evaluation of the catalyst stereoselectivity represents an important part of ongoing research in this field, aiding in the prediction of material properties of the resulting polymers for specifically targeted applications.

The development of a more diverse range of functionalized PHAs has also been sought to expand their thermal and mechanical properties. Biosynthetic approaches have produced many functionalized PHAs, enlarging their breadth to include PHAs bearing pendant groups such as chlorines,^{79,80} fluorines,^{81–83} bromines,⁸⁴ aromatics,^{85,86} esters,⁸⁷ thioesters,⁸⁸ epoxys,⁸⁹ phenoxy,^{90–93} and others.^{94–96} These routes have relied on copolymerization strategies by which bacteria incorporate unusual functional groups from a given feedstock alongside more traditional feedstocks, creating random PHA copolymers typically with a low amount of functionality.

Fluorinated PHAs were first targeted biosynthetically for their increased hydrophobicity and thermal transitions, but failed to make an impact due to low incorporation of fluorinated feedstocks.^{82,83} Coates and coworkers sought to produce highly fluorinated PHA homopolymers *via* a two-step process: carbonylation of fluorinated epoxides to four-membered β -lactone monomers, followed by the ROP using **17** to afford fluorinated PHAs.⁹⁷ These fluorinated PHAs showed increased T_g over their non-fluorinated counterparts and anticipated higher hydrophobicity.

Aromatic PHAs represent another synthetic target towards high- T_g PHAs imparted by the rigid aromatic groups. The stereoselective ROP of the *rac*- and *meso*-dibenzyl eight-membered diolide (8DL^{Bn}) using **2** enabled access to *it*- and *st*-poly(3-hydroxy-4-phenylbutyrate) (P3H4PhB) as well a series of random and diblock copolymers with other diolide-derived PHAs.⁴⁴ Stereoperfect *it*-P3H4PhB ($P_m > 99\%$) and *st*-P3H4PhB ($P_r = 92\%$) each exhibited a significantly increased T_g up to

43 °C. *Rac*-8DL^{Bn} was copolymerized with *meso*-8DL^{Bu} to provide a soft, elastomeric *st*-P3HHp polymer, which exhibited a high $T_{d5\%}$ of 281 °C, high fracture strain ($\epsilon_B \sim 191\%$) and good tensile strength ($\sigma_B \sim 22.7$ MPa).

Continued innovation in the realm of unusual PHAs derived chemosynthetically with designer monomers can unlock access to a diverse range of novel PHAs with unprecedented material properties.

Future of synthetic PHAs

With the dawn of stereomicrostructural engineering and functionalization of PHAs as well as PHA monomer design, we foresee the future of PHAs as incredibly bright. The amount of versatility that can be imbued in PHAs through these three approaches is vast and will continue to enable PHAs to be used in interdisciplinary applications. We predict the implementation of these PHAs in (multi-layered) packaging applications, textiles, adhesives, agriculture, biomedical fields, and high-end applications, especially in areas where biodegradability and/or biocompatibility are of primary importance.

Even with the great success achieved in the last decades, there are still several challenges that need to be overcome for the widespread implementation of PHAs. First, the synthesis of (lactone or diolide) monomers and (metal-based) catalysts needs to be further advanced to be more cost-effective and environmentally benign. Developing full chemical circularity of PHAs to recover their monomers in high selectivity and purity, and combined biocatalytic and chemocatalytic processes, present perhaps the most effective solutions to tackle this challenge. Second, the lack of closed-loop recycling for most of the current PHAs must be overcome to render their chemical circularity towards a circular PHA economy. Regenerating the highly strained lactone or the diolide monomers, essential for the ROP with fast kinetics and full monomer conversion, may be chemically unfeasible for some monomer structures adopting this ideally direct, short circular pathway, but leveraging an additional catalytic step could still close the entire circular loop. Third, to facilitate the industrial adoption of the chemocatalytic PHAs, large-scale product development must be comprehensively investigated *via* industrial processing and fabrication conditions. The PHA community across academia and industry needs to work together collaboratively on solving these issues, and we are optimistic about them being resolved in the near future so as to promote the applications of sustainable and affordable PHAs.

Author contributions

E. C. Q. and C. R. P.: writing – original draft preparation, writing – review & editing, and investigation; S. M. G. and E. Y.-X. C.: supervision, project administration, funding acquisition, and writing – review & editing.

Data availability

No primary research results, software or code have been included and no new data were generated or analyzed as part of this review.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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