

Old English Alliterative Verse

History

Old English alliterative verse, also called 'Anglo-Saxon verse', is the poetic form that dominated Old English secular literature; the insular tradition has its roots in continental Germanic poetry of the Dark Ages, which was a purely oral tradition of epic poetry concerned mainly with Germanic and Scandinavian battle lore, legend and folk-history. The Angles, Saxons and other Germanic peoples who invaded and settled Britain brought this *Heroic Age* poetry with them to the islands, where it flourished throughout the Old English period until the Norman Conquest of England.

Alliteration

Alliteration is a way of linking words through repetition of sound: in Modern English, this typically means alliterating words begin with the same consonant, consonant cluster, or vowel-sound, but this definition does not hold true for all periods of English poetry.

In Anglo-Saxon verse, alliteration not only defines the structure of the poetic line, but functions as a mnemonic device to facilitate memorization – in a culture of oral tradition, this is an important feature. While poetry in Romance languages, such as French, used rhyme to the same ends, Germanic poetry focuses on the first syllable, not the last, when linking words with parallel sounds. This is due to the *prosody* of Germanic languages – their rhythm and stress. Germanic words are generally conjugated by adding suffixes to a root word, so that the first syllable carries the most meaning and is therefore where the emphasis is put in speech (think, FRIEND-ship, SING-ing, LOVE-ly). With Germanic languages being so stress-driven, it is natural that a poetic form evolved which linked and counted stressed syllables.

Alliteration Rules

The Old English concept of alliteration is very similar to our Modern definition, but there are some key differences:

1. *Words alliterate on the first stressed syllable* - usually, but not necessarily, the first syllable
2. *All vowels alliterate with all other vowels* – no distinction is given between vowel sounds
3. *Consonant clusters are distinct from lone consonants* – 's' does not alliterate with 'st' or 'sh'
4. *Palatized 'c' alliterates with unpalatized 'c'; palatized 'g' alliterates with unpalatized 'g'*
 - a. hard 'c' as in colonel alliterates with 'ch' as in church;
 - b. hard 'g' as in gate alliterates with 'y' as in yoke.

Other Poetic Devices

1. *Kenning* – a compound metaphor, usually two words hyphenated, describing a noun
Ex: *whale-road* = the sea *sky-candle* = the sun *shield-play* = warfare
2. *Irony* – incongruity between apparent intention and true intention: ironic understatement is extensively used to succinctly and humbly describe the epic and wondrous.

Old English Alliterative VerseStructure

The basic unit of alliterative verse is the *long-line*, which in Anglo-Saxon verse consists of four stressed syllables, called *stresses* or *lifts*, and a variable number of unstressed syllables, called *dips*. Lines may also contain *half lifts*, being syllables that are stressed to a lesser extent than true lifts, such as the final syllables in the words *friendliness*, *enmity*, or *cowardice*.

This long-line is divided into two *half-lines*, each containing two lifts, with a pause called a *cæsura* dividing them. Typically, both lifts of the a-verse alliterate with each other and with the first lift of the b-verse.

Line 59 from *Beowulf* (Modern English translation):

He was four times a father this fighter prince
|----- a-verse -----| *cæsura* |----- b-verse -----|

While unstressed syllables and half lifts are not strictly counted or limited in the way lifts are, there are certain patterns, or rhythms, which are almost always adhered to in the construction of a half-line. In the early 20th century, the linguist Eduard Sievers classified these patterns into five distinct types, shown below; dips are represented by 'x,' half lifts by 'ẋ,' and lifts by '/':

Type A : Falling	lifts proceed dips	ex 1: / x / x	ex 2: / x x x / x
Type B : Rising	dips proceed lifts	ex 1: x / x /	ex 2: x x x / x x /
Type C : Rising / Falling	dips bracket lifts	ex 1: x // x	ex 2: x x x // x x
Type D : Two stresses at start	double lift at start of line	ex 1: // ẋ x	ex 2: // x ẋ
Type E: Falling/Rising	lifts bracket dip/half lift pair	ex 1: / x ẋ /	ex 2: / ẋ x /

Old English examples:

/ x x x / x x x x / / x
Meotodes meahte and his modgeþanc *Cædmon's Hymn*, line 2
(the Measurer's might and his mind-plans)

/ x x / x / x x / x
Frumſceaft fira feorran reccan *Beowulf*, line 90
([the] origin [of] men from far [time] [to] recount)

Modern English (Translated) example:

x / x / x x / x /
A balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede *Beowulf*, line 63 (Seamus Heaney)

Middle English Alliterative VerseHistory

In 1066, the Normans conquered England, displacing the Anglo-Saxon ruling class and suppressing English as a literary language; French rhyming poetry and prose romances dominated secular literature, just as French words and grammar slipped into the evolving English language. When English regained its footing in the 14th century, and respectable prose and poetry began again to be written in the vernacular, a so-called 'alliterative revival' occurred: 14th century poets drew on the rich Old English poetic tradition and adapted the rigid and formulaic Anglo-Saxon verse into a freer form that better suited their French influenced dialect.

Alliteration

For the most part, alliteration in the late middle ages functioned as it did through the Old English period; words still alliterated on the first stressed syllable; however, with the influx of French loan-words, the language's prosody had changed. Many Middle English words did not begin with stressed syllables (ex: e-SCAPE, do-MAIN), hugely impacting the rhythm of verse, and making it very difficult to remain inside the classical Anglo-Saxon form.

Similarly, the Anglo-Norman poetic tradition introduced rhyme and alternating stress (iambic meter) into alliterative verse, leading to hybrid forms which incorporated both Norman and Anglo-Saxon poetic devices, such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which is structured by its meter and rhyme but makes regular use of alliteration, or the bobs & wheels present in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Alliteration Rules

Changes to alliteration rules during the Middle English period:

1. *Vowels alliterate with 'H'* – in Middle English, 'h' had become silent, so that syllables beginning in an 'h' carried the sound of the vowel following it (as in hour, herbs).
2. *'C' and 'ch' are distinct sounds; 'g' and 'y' are distinct sounds*

Other Poetic Devices

1. *Rhyme* – linking words by repetition of sound in the final syllables
2. *Bob and wheel* – a stanza of five rhyming lines (*ababa*), the first of which contains a single stress, with the following four lines containing three stresses each, in iambic meter.

Example: bob and wheel from first stanza of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 15-19

x /	
Wyth w ynne,	With joy,
x / x / x / x	
Where w erre and w rake and w onder	Where war and revenge and wonders
x / x / x /	
Bi sythes has wont therinne,	On occasions have dwelled therein,
x / x / x / x	
And oft both b lysse and b lunder	And often both joy and strife
x / x / x /	
Ful s ketete has s kyfted s ynne.	Very swiftly have alternated since.

Middle English Alliterative VerseStructure

It is difficult to summarize the structure of alliterative revival poetry, because there are no strict rules to which poetry of this period conform to; unlike Anglo-Saxon poets, who held closely to the traditional Heroic Age fixed form, Middle English poets took more liberties with rhythm and alliteration.

Sometimes the Anglo-Saxon alliterative pattern of *aa*, *ax* was retained, meaning that the lifts of each a-verse alliterate with the first lift of the corresponding b-verse. However, Middle English poets often varied their lines tremendously: lines might alliterate only two lifts, all four, or none at all! When three lifts did alliterate, they did not always fall into the classic *aa*, *ax* pattern; unstressed syllables could even alliterate with stressed. The rhyme schemes and meter were freer as well in this 'informal alliterative poetry' style.

Alliterative Verse Timeline

4th – 5th C	Germanic Heroic Age	
7th – 11th C	Old English Period	
	<i>Ca. 658 – 680</i>	<i>Cædmon's Hymn</i>
	<i>? Late 7th C</i>	<i>The Dream of the Rood</i>
	<i>? ca. 750</i>	<i>Beowulf</i> composed
	<i>10th C</i>	<i>Judith</i>
	<i>Ca. 975</i>	<i>The Exeter Book (The Wanderer, The Seafarer)</i>
	<i>Ca. 1000</i>	<i>Beowulf</i> manuscript
	<i>11th C</i>	<i>The Battle of Maldon</i>
	<i>9th-12th C</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i>
	<i>1066</i>	Norman conquest of England
12th – 15th C	Middle English Period	
	<i>Ca. 1200</i>	<i>Layamon's Brut</i>
	<i>Ca. 1352-1390</i>	<i>The Parlement of the Thre Ages</i>
	<i>Ca. 1375-1400</i>	<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>
	<i>Ca. 1377-1379</i>	<i>Piers Plowman</i>
	<i>Ca. 1387-1389</i>	<i>The Canterbury Tales</i>
	<i>15th C</i>	<i>Alliterative Morte Athure</i>
	<i>1485</i>	Henry VII coronated

This handout can be found at: <http://angharatgoch.com/classes/alliterative-verse/>

Glossary

A-verse – the first *half-line* in a *long-line* of alliterative verse; also called *on-verse*.

Accent – see *stress*.

Accentual verse – a form of poetry in which each line or stanza has a fixed number of *stresses*, but can vary in number of unstressed syllables.

Alliteration – a poetic device in which the first syllables (or first stressed syllables) in words are linked by having the same sound.

B-verse – the second *half-line* in a *long-line* of alliterative verse; also called *off-verse*.

Bob & Wheel – a stanza of five rhyming lines (*ababa* pattern) in which the first line (bob) has one stress, and the second through fifth lines (wheel) each contain three stresses; typically in alternating meter.

Cæsura – the pause between the *half-lines* (*a-verse* and *b-verse*) of a *long-line* in alliterative verse.

Half-line – a subdivision of the *long-line* in alliterative verse; also called a *verse* (*a-verses* or *b-verses*).

Iambic meter – a poetic rhythm which alternates between unstressed and stressed syllables.

Kenning – a poetic device in which a descriptive compound (usually two words hyphenated) is used instead of a one-word noun.

Lift – see *stress*.

Long-line – the basic unit in alliterative verse, comprised of an *a-verse*, a *caesura*, and a *b-verse*.

Off-verse – see *b-verse*.

On-verse – see *a-verse*.

Prosody – the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech.

Stress – generally, the natural emphasis in speech, or specifically, an emphasized syllable; also called *lift* or *accent*.

Syllabic verse – a form of poetry in which each line or stanza has a fixed number of syllables, but can vary in how many *stresses*.

Verse – generally, a synonym for ‘poetry’, or specifically, a *half-line* in an alliterative *long-line*.