Alliterative Verse

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What is alliteration?

- **Alliteration** (also called 'head rhyme' or 'initial rhyme') is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words or at the beginning of stressed syllables within words that are in close proximity to each other.

Can you spot the alliterations?

"I caught this morning morning's minion,

kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-

dawn-drawn Falcon . . ."

—from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Windhover"

How many did you get?

"I caught this morning morning's minion,

kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-

dawn-drawn Falcon . . ."

How about this one?

"The City's voice itself is soft like Solitude's"

—from P.B. Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples"

Could you spot all of them?

"The **C**ity's voice it**s**elf is **s**oft like **S**olitude's"

Here, consonant sounds both at the **beginning of words** (**C**ity, **s**oft, **S**olitude) and at the **beginning of the stressed syllable within a word** (it**s**elf) are repeated

Please remember

- Consonant sounds at the beginning of words or at the beginning of stressed syllables within words mean the first sounds preceding the vowels in the syllables carrying the primary stresses.

What is alliterative verse?

- Alliterative verse is the early verse of the Germanic languages, **including Old English**, in which **alliteration is not an occasional embellishment, but a basic structural principle**.

- This was the standard form of Old English poetry up to the 11th century.

The alliterative metre

- These Old English poems are said to be written in the **alliterative metre**.

- In **Old English alliterative metre**, alliteration is the governing principle with strict rules of accent and quantity.

Structure of Old English verse

- Old English verse is usually unrhymed.

- The Old English alliterative line consists of two hemistichs (half-lines), each with two strong stresses and separated by a caesura (decisive pause).

How did it work?

- At least one, and usually both, of the two stressed syllables in the first hemistich (half-line) alliterate with the first stressed syllable of the second hemistich.

- Example: **N**äp **n**ihtscüa, || **n**orþan snïwde

<div align="right">—From Seafarer</div>

The Alliterative Revival

- Alliterative poetry was revived in Middle English as a formal alternative to the syllable-counting, rhymed verse borrowed from French.

- Alliterative Revival is collective term for the group of alliterative poems written in the second half of the 14th century, in which alliteration was again used in poetry of the first importance.

Famous works

- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written circa 1375

- *Piers Plowman*, purportedly written and revised by William Langland between the mid-1360s to the mid-1380s

Back with a difference

- In Middle English, the alliterative rules were much less strict, even among the poets of the Alliterative Revival.

- However, the alliteration in Middle English was often very dense.

Why was it revived?

- A number of possible reasons have been put forward to explain the Alliterative Revival. The most persuasive one is that it was a straightforward development of the loose alliterative poetry of the previous century (13th century, i.e. 1200-1299) which the new movement only enhanced.

Enter Piers Plowman

- Here's how the first lines of the Prologue to *Piers Plowman* go:

"In a **s**omer **s**esun, whon **s**ofte was the **s**onne,

I **sch**op me into a **sh**roud, as I a **sch**eep were;

In **h**abite as an **h**ermite un**h**oly of **w**erkes

Wente I **w**yde in this **w**orld **w**ondres to here"

In modern verse translation

"One summer season when the sun was still soft,

I set off like a sheep in a shaggy woolen smock,

The unholy habit of a wandering hermit,

And went seeking wonders in the wide, wide

world."   —From William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Modern Verse Translation*, tr. Peter Sutton (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2014), 21.

Who wrote it? How long is it?

- William Langland (c. 1325-c. 1390) is **thought to be** the author of the work.

- The work survives in **52 manuscripts** and **four printed editions** published about a hundred-and-fifty years after the author died.

The problem of fixing the text

- There are **at least three different versions** of the text of *Piers Plowman*. They are known as the A-text, B-text and the C-text.

- The versions vary in length from **2,567 lines (A-text)** to **7,277 lines (B-text)**. Most modern editions are based on the **B-text**.

Author's identity

- The most persuasive source for the identity of the author is a note appended in Latin to an early manuscript of the poem held in Trinity College Library, Dublin. It says the father of "Willielmus de Langlond" was Stacy de Rokayle of Shipton-under-Wychwood in Oxfordshire and that this William wrote the poem.

What's the story?

- *Piers Plowman* is a moving, disturbing and often amusing commentary on corruption and greed. It gives a vivid insight into the social attitudes and everyday concerns of England in the 14th century as well as into contemporary religious beliefs, and it is this mixture of the sublime and the familiar, the coarse and the spiritual, that gives the poem its unique strength.

What is the point of the story?

- *Piers Plowman* revolves around the narrator, Long Will's*, quest for how to live a good Christian life that combines practical activity with spiritual reflection. In the poem, imagination is brought to bear on urgent theological questions.

  *Long Will is thought to be a pun on William Langland's name.

What it talks about

- The poem not only explores Christian mysticism and morality, but also examines the role and duties of government, the papacy, the clergy and the different social classes, and considers economic relations, criminal justice, welfare, food shortages, finance, taxation, trade, war and peace, heredity, medicine, the natural world, marital relations, child- rearing and the limits of academic learning.

How does the story progress?

- Thematically the poem is often divided into two parts—the 'Visio' (vision) and the 'Vita' (life). They correspond to the narrator, Long Will, falling asleep on the Malvern Hills in West Midland, England and having visions; and then waking up and trying to put into practice the lessons gained from observing the actions of Christ in the visions.

The story as a journey

- Structurally the poem is divided into twenty chapters that follow the Prologue.

- Each chapter is called a passus, Latin for "step."

- Thus the entire poem can be seen as a journey.

The characters

- The poem has both human and non-human characters. The most important human characters are:

1. Long Will, the narrator;

2. Piers Plowman, an honest farmer who leads men to search for Truth; later he returns, transfigured, and his action is indistinguishable from Christ's.

A large cast

3. Christ, the redeemer of men in their fallen state.

- Apart from these three, merchants, bankers, brewers and judges, scholars, sheriffs, bishops and priests come tumbling out of the text alongside wastrels and vagabonds, thieves and fraudsters, drunkards and whores.

The non-humans

- Conscience, Fidelity, Gluttony, Pride and the other human strengths and weaknesses are also named as characters in the poem

References

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- M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* 7th edition.

- *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* online version.

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