

## ME VERSE: VOCABULARY AND POETICS of *SGGK*

### THE ORIGINS OF ALLITERATIVE POETRY

ME alliterative poetry has its roots in Anglo-Saxon (AS), also known as Old English (OE), poetry, whose metre is strict, with a regular pattern of stressed syllables interacting with the scheme of alliteration.

A line of AS alliterative poetry has four stresses. The line (called a ‘verse’; cf. modern French *vers*) is divided into two, generally around the middle, by a syntactical break or pause called a ‘caesura’; at the same time, a pattern of alliteration reconnects the two half-lines or verses. Modern editors often represent the caesura visually by inserting a gap between the two parts of the line, although this is not found in medieval manuscripts:

He uerde to Bruitaine, to ađelest alre bolde,  
To Howeles castle, hāh mon inne Brutene.  
Ƣa 3aten all he tobrac and binnen he gon wende;  
He nom þare halle wah and helden hine to grunde;  
Ƣæs bures he warp adun þat heo tobarst uiuen.

(W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg, eds, *Lazamon's Arthur: The Arthurian Section of Lazamon's 'Brut'*.  
Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter:  
University of Exeter Press, 1989), ll. 12917-21)

AS alliterative poetry has a complex set of rules; each verse must conform to one of five rhythmic patterns or types (now designated A–E), and all types must contain two stressed syllables (lifts), and two or more groups of unstressed syllables (drops). The rules of ME alliterative verse are less complex and were often broken.

### *SGGK*

*SGGK* is divided into stanzas, made up of varying numbers of unrhymed lines (the shortest unit is 17 lines, the longest 42), followed by a unit of five short iambic lines, rhyming ababa. This unit is known as a bob and wheel:

‘Ye lende,	a	] the bob
And I schal erly rise;	b	
On huntynge wyl I wende.’	a	
Gawayn grauntes all thise,	b	the
Him heldande as the hende.	a	] wheel

(ll. 1100-04)

The bob often acts a link between the unrhymed lines and the wheel by concluding the preceding sentence. (The example above is one of the few instances where a bob begins a sentence.)

Most of the alliterative lines in *SGGK* have two stressed syllables in each half, and a variable number of unstressed syllables. The caesura coincides with the natural break in the line’s syntax (even where this is not marked by punctuation: and remember that the punctuation in the text has been inserted by the editor) and so is usually easy to identify. Thus, line 41

There tournayed tulkes by tymes ful mony

breaks down into its component parts at a suitable thought-break (which itself offers a useful breath-break):

There tournayed tulkes // by tymes ful mony.

The stressed syllables are obvious, especially when the line is read aloud:

Ther tóurnayed túlkes // by týmes ful móny.

The stressed syllables often coincide with the alliterative syllables, with alliteration on two stresses in the first half and one in the second:

Ther tóurnayed túlkes // by týmes ful móny.

However, the poem displays many deviations from this standard form: for example, some lines have three stressed syllables in the first half; some lines alliterate on five syllables.

### VOCABULARY

Alliterative poetry requires a large vocabulary; *SGGK* total vocabulary is around 2,650 words. Most derive from OE; about 250 are of Scandinavian origin and another 750 come from OF. The Gawain-poet (those studying *Pearl* may call him the Pearl-poet) uses many synonyms and, as well as benefiting from words of non-OE origin, takes advantage of variant spellings available to him. *Gawain* and *Guenore* have variants beginning in *W* (*Wawen*, *Wenore*), for instance. The poet also draws on synonyms for frequently-occurring words; thus ‘man’ or ‘knight’ might, depending on the alliterative sound required, appear as *burne*, *freke*, *gome*, *hathel*, *lede*, *mon*, *renk*, *segge*, or *wyye*.

### FURTHER READING

More details on metre can be found in the Appendix to *SGGK*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, rev. by Norman Davis, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp. 147–52 (WUL: [PR2065.G3](#)); pp. 138–43 offers a detailed assessment of the vocabulary. This edition includes etymologies in the glossary entries.

### EXERCISE 3: IDENTIFYING ALLITERATION AND STRESSES

In each line in the following passage, mark 1) the caesura, 2) the alliterative sound, and 3) the stressed syllables. Examine how this metrical pattern – the stresses, the pauses, the alliterative sounds selected by the poet – interacts with the narrative.

Thus laykes this lord by lynde-wodes eves,  
And Gawayn the good mon in gay bed lyes,  
Lurkes while the daylyght lemed on the woves  
Under covertour ful clere, cortayned aboute.  
And as in slomeryng he slode, sleyly he herd  
A littel dyn at his dor and dernly upon;  
And he heves up his hed out of the clothes,  
A corner of the cortayn he caght up a littel,  
And waytes warely thiderwarde what hit be myght.  
Hit was the ladi, loveliest to beholde,  
That drow the dor after hir ful dernly and stille,  
And bowed towarde the bed; and the burne schamed  
And layd him doun lystily, and let as he slepte [...]