Alliteration in Modern and Middle English: *Piers Plowman*

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Abstract

William Langland's 8000-line fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman* uses an alliterative rhyme scheme inherited from Old English in which, instead of a rhyme at the *end* of a line, at least three out of the four stressed syllables in each line *begin* with the same sound, and this is combined with a caesura at the mid-point of the line. Examples show that Langland does not obey the rules exactly, but he is nevertheless thought to be at the forefront of a revival of alliterative verse. Further examples demonstrate that alliteration was never entirely replaced by end-rhyme and remains a feature of present-day vernacular English and poetry, even though the rhyme scheme is obsolete. It is deeply embedded in the structure and psyche of the English language.

Key words: alliteration, Langland, medieval, Middle English, poetry.

Introduction

The author's translation into modern alliterative verse of the lengthy fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman* is in the process of publication (Sutton publication pending). The poem was written by William Langland, a contemporary of Chaucer, and is both a quest for how to live a good moral life and a critique of corruption that is still apposite. This article gives an insight into the alliterative rhyme scheme used in *Piers Plowman* and in much other Middle English poetry, which still has a strong influence today. The article briefly discusses the structure and content of the poem, and then explains the rules of the alliterative rhyme scheme in detail, giving examples from *Piers Plowman* and other medieval verse, including the cycles of miracle plays that were a significant feature of a vibrant literary life. It becomes evident that alliteration still had an influence even when end-rhyme became fashionable, and examples of modern verse show that it continues to do so today.

About the Poem

The earliest version of the poem now known as *Piers Plowman* probably dates from the 1360s, and longer versions from the late 1370s to the 1390s, so that it was written at around the time that Geoffrey Chaucer composed his *Canterbury Tales*. This was a period of political and religious upheaval, of plague and famine, and of growing literary activity, when the French of the Norman elite and the Old English of the suppressed Anglo-Saxon lower classes was still in the process of coalescing into one language, now termed Middle English. The author of the poem is said to be William Langland, although there is much scholarly discussion of his true name and identity.

Piers Plowman falls into two sections, each with its own title, and the complete poem,

which concerns the Narrator's quest for how to live a good Christian life, has around 8000 lines or 75,000 words. It includes over 300 quotations from the Latin text of the Bible and from a few other Christian and classical Latin sources, and after the Prologue, each of the 20 chapters is called a *passus*, the Latin for "step". The original title of the whole poem is *Liber de Petro Plowman* or "Book of Peter the Plowman", Piers being a diminutive of Peter and the form of the name used in the poem.

As well as being a quest for the way to save one's soul, the poem is a critique of corruption and greed that still applies today. The poem opens with the Narrator falling asleep and seeing a vision of a "fair field full of folk" caught between heaven and hell. A rowdy wedding is to take place between Miss Money and Falsehood, but the matter is referred to the King who asks Conscience to marry her instead. Conscience refuses, and the King sends for Reason to support him. In his next dream, the Narrator sees the Seven Deadly Sins make their confession, and the penitent people agree to set out in search of Truth. Piers the honest ploughman offers to lead them once he has finished the harvest. He is offered a pardon from their sins for those who help him, but he tears the document in two, arguing that what matters is simply to "do well".

The second part of the poem concerns the Narrator's attempt to discover what doing well means. In further dreams he sees visions of Thought and Intelligence, Study, Learning and Scripture, Fortune, Fidelity, Nature and Imagination, Faith, Hope and Charity, and concludes that the way to live well is to follow Christ's commandments to love God and one's neighbours, and to treat others as one wishes to be treated oneself. The high point is reached when the Narrator dreams of the Harrowing of Hell, when Christ releases worthy souls from the clutches of the devil. The forces of the Antichrist then gather to make a renewed assault on Faith. Conscience sets off to seek the help of Piers once more, and the Narrator awakes for the last time.

A total of some sixty early copies of the poem are extant, including printed editions that appeared in the mid-sixteenth century, about a hundred and fifty years after the author died. These versions differ markedly in length, content and structure, and were divided into three main groups in the late nineteenth century. All of the extracts in this article are taken from an edition of the B text dating from that time (Skeat 1886). Later editors (Kane and Donaldson 2002, and Schmidt 1995) have preserved this grouping, and have identified an even earlier draft of the poem termed Z.

End-Rhyme

Despite recent developments, "verse" still means to most English-speakers what the editor of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* said a hundred years ago: "Verse is memorable speech set down in metre with strict rhythms" (Quiller-Couch 1917:35). Moreover, it is often thought that lines of verse should rhyme, and this was the common belief also in the fourteenth century. However, rhyme then meant two different things. The form of rhyme more familiar to us is the end-rhyme used by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*. (The spelling in the following quotation, and in several of those below, has been modernised, although "riden", the old infinitive, and "firste" [first] need to remain two syllables. "Loved" should also be pronounced as two syllables to aid the rhythm):

A knight there was, and that a worthy ***man****,*
That from the time that he firste ***began***
To riden out, he loved ***chivalry****,*
Truth and honour, freedom and ***courtesy****.*

(Chaucer n.d.:3-4)

This style of end-rhyme "had long been practised in France…and in Italy…by Dante, Petrarch and Boccace" (Chaucer n.d.:xvi - Boccace is better known as Boccaccio). End-rhyme was already established in England too, as can be seen in the following two songs from around the year 1300:

The Lent is come with love to town,
With blossom and with songbirds' roun,
Which all this bliss bringeth;
Daisies in the dales,
Sweet notes of nightingales,
Each fowl a song singeth…

(Oxford Book of English Verse No. 4 – Lent is the spring, "roun" means "voice")

Winter wakens all my care,
Now these leaves are waxing bare…

(Oxford Book of English Verse No. 7)

End-rhymes are also found in the known versions of the cycles of miracle plays, which told stories from the Bible while preserving some of the popular culture of pre-Norman England and were performed by guilds of tradesmen in towns up and down the country between the late thirteenth and the early sixteenth centuries:

Hail, comely and clean! Hail, young child!
Hail, maker, as I mean, of a maiden so mild …

(Townely Cycle, *Oxford Book of English Verse* No. 27)

'I am gracious and great, God without beginning,
I am maker unmade, all might is in me,
I am life and way unto wealth-winning…'
(York Cycle, Pollard 1923:1)
'I, God, that all this world hath wrought,
Heaven and earth, and all from nought …'

(Chester Cycle, Pollard 1923:8)

Alliterative Rhyme

Langland, on the other hand, does not use end-rhyme but keeps to an alliterative

scheme inherited from Old English, the Germanic language spoken before the Norman invasion of the eleventh century. This scheme is quite different. Instead of a rhyme at the *end* of a word, at least three out of the four stressed syllables in each line *begin* with the same sound. This can be seen in two other fourteenth-century poems, which begin as follows:

> *Als I* ***went*** *in the* ***weste wandryng*** *my one,*
> *Bi a* ***bonke*** *of a* ***bourne bryghte*** *was the sone…*
> (*When I walked in the west, wandering on my own / By the bank of a brook, bright was the sun…*, from *Wynnere and Wastoure*, reproduced in Ford 1954:316)

> *In the* ***monethe*** *of* ***Maye*** *when* ***mirthes*** *bene fele,*
> *And the* ***sesone*** *of* ***somere*** *when* ***softe*** *bene the wedres…*
> (*In the month of May when pleasures are plentiful / and the season of summer when soft are the weathers…*, from *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, reproduced in Ford 1954:302)

Piers Plowman opens with rather similar lines:

> *In a* ***somer seson*** *whan* ***soft*** *was the* ***sonne,***
> *I* ***shope*** *me in* ***shroudes*** *as I a* ***shepe*** *were,*
> *In* ***habit*** *as an* ***heremite*** *un****holy*** *of workes,*
> *Went* ***wyde*** *in this* ***world wondres*** *to here.*

Or in Modern English:

> *One* ***summer season*** *when the* ***sun*** *was still* ***soft,***
> *I set off like a* ***shepherd*** *in a* ***sheep's-wool smock,***
> *The un****holy habit*** *of a wandering* ***hermit,***
> *And* ***went*** *seeking* ***wonders*** *in the* ***wide,*** *wide* ***world****.*
> (Sutton, publication pending)

Instead of three rhyming sounds in a line, it is also permissible to have two pairs of stressed sounds. An example of this occurs in the second of the following two lines of *Piers Plowman* (Y / Y / R / R):

> ***Emperoures*** *and* ***erlis*** *and* ***al*** *manere lords*
> *For* ***yifts*** *have* ***yonge*** *men to* ***run*** *and to* ***ride****.*
> (*Emperors and earls and all manner of lords / For gifts have young men to run and to ride* – meaning that young men run errands in exchange for gifts, Step III lines 212-213)

(The letter Y here represents a letter of the alphabet that is lost and looked like a 3. It has been replaced in modern English by either G or Y, depending on the way in which the pronunciation has changed.)

Where the stressed sound is a vowel, any vowel is acceptable, as is seen above in emperors/earls/all (E/E/A). Moreover, although H is often treated as a consonant and is rhymed with other Hs, it is sometimes disregarded even when it should presumably be pronounced:

> ***Envy*** *with heuy* ***herte*** • ***asked*** *after schrifte.*
> (*Envy with heavy heart asked for shrift*, Step V line 76).

The other main feature of alliterative verse is the caesura or break that occurs between the first pair and the second pair of stressed syllables in each line. It should be placed between grammatical structures, or in other words, it should be natural to pause at that mid-point when reading the line. The caesura is marked in the line above.

The number of unstressed syllables in a line varies considerably, although some rules have been deduced. These can be summarised as follows (see Inoue and Stokes 2012):

1. A line may begin with between zero and three unstressed syllables.
2. The normal "dip" between the stressed syllables consists of two or three unstressed syllables, although four are possible in the first half of a line.
3. Four unstressed syllables are not possible where one of these is a "heavy lexical item" (a noun, verb or significant adverb or adjective) that would normally be stressed.
4. The line should end either in the fourth stressed syllable or in no more than one unstressed syllable.

Langland does not obey all these rules. While it should usually be the first three stressed syllables in a line that share a common sound, in *Piers Plowman* it is occasionally the first two and the fourth, as in the following line:

> *Un**kynde** to her* ***kyn*** • *and to alle* ***cristene****.*
> (*Uncharitable to their kin and to all Christians*, Step I line 192)

In some lines, Langland breaks the rules further by beginning the two stressed syllables with the same sound in the first half of the line, as in the example below (toke, two), but only the *unstressed* first word in the second half. In this case, the word (to) is not only unstressed but a very weak, closed-class word:

> *And he* ***toke*** *hym* ***two*** *pans* • ***to*** *lyflode as it were.*
> (*And he gave him two pence for expenses as it were*, Step XVII line 76)

This apparent misplacing of the dominant consonant can also occur in the first half of a line: in the line quoted above beginning "For gifts have young men…", the stress falls more naturally on "men" than on "young".

And sometimes, the rhyme letter seems not to fall on any stressed syllable:

I seigh neuere such a man so god me helpe.
(*I never saw such a man, God help me*, Step XV line 153)

The stress falls much more naturally on “neuere”, “man” and “god” than on the rhyming S of “seigh”, “such” and “so”. Perhaps Langland might have argued that the S begins the first word in each of three of the four feet or phrases of the line, rather than the stressed syllables. Such freedom in the use of alliteration can therefore be viewed either as a development of the form or as showing that “Langland was not very particular about his metre” (Skeat 1886:lxi).

For all that, Langland is aware of consonantal and vowel sounds in every line. Sometimes, he carries a sound over from one line to another, and in the first of the following three lines there is also a subsidiary sound, TH:

*“A**wreke** me of thise **wastoures** that this **world** schendeth!”*
*Hunger in haste tho hent **Wastour** bi the mawe,*
*And **wronge** hym so bi the **wombe** that bothe his eyen **wattered**.*
(“*Avenge me on wastrels that ruin this world!” / Hunger in haste then seized Wastrel by the stomach / and shook him so by the belly that both his eyes watered*, Step VI lines 175-177 – it is assumed that the rhyming W was always pronounced.)

However, although Langland carries over sounds from one line to another, he does not generally observe the earlier Old English custom whereby the “irregular” fourth sound often becomes the dominant sound in the following line (and in the line beginning “Hunger…”, the third H once more falls on an unstressed syllable at the start of the second half, “hent”). In short, although some of the irregularities in *Piers Plowman* may be due to errors or emendations by copyists, “for more perfect specimens of alliterative verse, the poems of the Anglo-Saxon period should be particularly studied” (Skeat 1886:lxi).

The Survival of Alliteration

It has been suggested that Langland was in the forefront of a “fourteenth-century revival of alliterative verse in the West Midlands and North-West England” (Elliott 1969:228). There is a substantial body of literature to support this notion. *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight* is in the dialect of the North-West of England, is alliterative and is part of a cycle that includes *The Avowing of Arthure* and *The Awntyrs of Arthure*, and it may be associated with *Sir Perceval of Galles*. Three other poems are thought to be by the same author as *Sir Gawayne*. These are *Pearl*, *Purity* and *Patience*, and they too are alliterative.

The poem that is most closely linked with *Piers Plowman* is *Wynnere and Wastoure*, quoted above, which was written by an unknown author some time between 1350 and 1370. This “anthologizes some of the most popular commonplaces of vernacular poetry” (Trigg 1989:92) and shares some of the content of *Piers Plowman*. Not only does it start with the same conventional setting of a hillside in summer but it also describes a dispute

to be settled by a king, in this case between gainful employment (winning) and idle consumption (wasting). Knight (1969:283) says indeed that it is "commonly thought" that the only contemporary literature that Langland knew was *Wynnere and Wastoure*, although he also suggests some other alliterative poems that may have inspired him: *Mum and the Sothsegger, The Crowned King, Pierce the Ploughman's Crede, Death and Liffe*, and *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, which also opens with the convention of walking out in the summer month of May and follows the strict alliterative rule.

However, since the dating of most medieval poems is uncertain and we cannot tell how many poems are lost, we do not know who influenced whom. Moreover, instead of being a revival, this body of literature may represent "the final poems we have in English of the great oral tradition of Northern European alliterative poetry" (Speirs 1959:33), thus not being a "revival" at all but a continuation. This seems likely, given the apparent preservation of a tradition of alliteration in the miracle plays and in songs, even where there is an end-rhyme. Residual alliteration is particularly strong in the miracle plays, as can be seen above:

Comely - clean
Maker - mean - maiden - mild
Gracious - great - God
Maker - unmade - might
Way - wealth - winning…

In the two rhymed poems quoted at the start of this discussion, sounds also carry over from one line to the next:

Blossom - birds / bliss
Winter - wakes / waxing

Furthermore, alliteration remains a feature of vernacular English, particularly in informal phrases such as "chalk and cheese", "silly season", "purple prose" and "go for goal", as well as in fictitious names (Benjamin Bunny, Roy of the Rovers, Gary Glitter), although assonance and end-rhymes are now even more popular in slang pairings such as "walk the talk", "snail mail" and "man with a van". Such coinings were quite possibly as current in the Middle Ages as they are now, and Langland could hardly have avoided awareness of them.

Furthermore, despite the preference for end-rhymes, the excursion into blank verse pentameters in the age of Shakespeare, and the recent vogue for free verse, alliteration has remained current in poetry:

For good grows wild and wide,
Has shades, is nowhere none…

(From "On a piece of music" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hopkins 1953:81)

Sails drank the wind, and white as milk
He sped into the drinking dark…
(From "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait" by Dylan Thomas, Thomas 1966:19)

Gaged in normality we dumbly watch
From our dark office windows, feel that something –
Spring? or our sanity? – has let us down.
(From "Spring Afternoon" by U.A. Fanthorpe, Fanthorpe 1982:38)

Sometimes it's about running to stand
In sunlight splayed through the forest...
(From "Catching the Light" by Kenneth Steven, Steven 2007:39)

It can therefore be argued that when a present-day politician speaks of "ripping off the rich" or "plundering the poor", he or she is striking a chord that runs deep in the structure and psyche of the English language, even though the formal structure of alliterative verse may be lost.

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Բաղաձայնույթը ժամանակակից և միջին անգլերենում. ***Պետեր հողագործի տեսիլքը***

14-րդ դարի բանաստեղծ Վիլյամ Լենգլենդը իր *Պետեր հողագործի տեսիլքը* 8000 տողից բաղկացած բանաստեղծության մեջ օգտագործում է հին անգլերենի բաղաձայնույթային հանգավորում՝ յուրաքանչյուր տողում շեշտված չորս վանկերից առնվազն երեքը սկսվում են նույն հնչյունով: Օրինակները ցույց են տալիս, որ Լենգլենդը ճշգրտորեն չի հետևում կանոններին, սակայն, այնուամենայնիվ, նա համարվում է բաղաձայնույթային չափածո ժանրի վերածննդի նախահայր: Հետագա օրինակները ցույց են տալիս, որ բաղաձայնույթը երբեք ամբողջությամբ չի փոխարինվել վերջնահանգավորմամբ ու դեռևս պահպանվում է անգլերենի տեղական բարբառներում և պոեզիայում, չնայած հանգավորման սխեման հնացած է: Այն խորը արմատներ ունի անգլերեն լեզվի կառուցվածքում և հոգեբանության մեջ:

Аллитерация в современном английском и среднеанглийском: ***Видение о Петре Пахаре***

В стихотворении 14-ого века Уильяма Ленгленда *Видение о Петре Пахаре* состоящая из 8000 строк используется аллитерационная схема рифмы, заимствованной от древнеанглийского, в котором, вместо рифмы в конце строки, по меньшей мере, три из четырех ударных слогов в каждой строке начинаются с одного и того же звука. Примеры показывают, что Ленгленд в точности не соблюдает правила. Тем не менее он сыграл вожнейшую роль в возрождении аллитерационного стиха. Дальнейшие примеры показывают, что аллитерация никогда не была полностью заменена рифмованным концом и остается характерной чертой современного английского языка и поэзии, хотя сама схема рифмы является устаревшим. Она имеет глубокие корни в структуре и психике английского языка.