Anglo-Saxon Alliterative Verse and Riddles

Alliterative Verse

So, what is alliterative verse anyway? Alliteration, in its simplest form, is the repetition of consonant or vowel sounds in a line.

Seven ***s***ilver ***s***wans ***s***wam ***s***ilently ***s***eaward.

The s-sound is repeated (over and over), and that is the basics of alliteration: the repetition of the same (or similar) consonant or vowel sounds. In verse, alliteration only need keep the same sound in the same line; the next line can have a different sound alliterated. For example:

horse and **h**orseman; **h**oofbeats afar
sank into **s**ilence: **s**o the **s**ongs tell us.*

If you've never used alliteration before (and don't worry; most people haven't), you may feel more comfortable starting out putting alliteration into the more “familiar” (in English) rhymed verse. It isn't strictly Anglo-Saxon, but it's a start. For that matter, you may not ever go beyond this point, and that's fine too.

Making It Anglo-Saxon

Once you're comfortable with alliteration, or if you feel like jumping in right away, the next step is to put your alliteration into Anglo-Saxon form. This would be unrhymed verse that follows a specific meter. If your work ends up rhyming, that's not the end of the world, as rhyme in verse does appear at the end of period. It just is very rare.

(Side-note: Anglo-Saxon verse is meant to be sung or spoken aloud, and when written, was often just strung together with no division of verses or even separate lines. Our use of verses, lines, and half-lines in the following discussion is a modern convention developed to explore the structure of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse and its performance, but it does not reflect how it was originally written down.)

First of all, a song or poem can be broken down into verses, though in Anglo-Saxon poetry this is an optional, modern convention. It may be easier to break it into verses, simply for performance purposes, so that you can divide it up for memorization, or for reading while reciting or singing, or for organizing themes or ideas. For Anglo-Saxon verse, though, we are more concerned about the **line**. Here a line means a set of words linked by numbers of beats and by alliteration.

Anglo-Saxon poetry does not worry about syllables in a line; it worries about beats, traditionally four. A beat is the stressed syllable of a sung or spoken line. For example:

HORSE and HORSEman; HOOFbeats aFAR
*SANK into SIlence: SO the songs TELL us. **

The number of syllables in each line is not the same. Each line is broken up into two **half-lines**, each with two beats and a minimum of two unstressed syllables. This actually isn't as complicated as it might sound; in the above example, "horse and horseman" is one half-line and "hoofbeats afar" is the other, the same with "sank into silence" and "so

the songs tell us."

So, now you have the optional verse, the lines, the half-lines, and the meter. How does alliteration fit into all of this? Well, simply put, the repeated sound should fall on the first beat of the second half-line, and either beat (or both!) of the first half-line, with the first beat being the more common of the three.

MOURN not overmuch, MIGHTy was the fallen. *

Commonly, though not always, one of the other beats also alliterates:

Mourn not over***m***uch, mighty was the fallen. *

This is usually the other beat of the first half-line, as in the example above, but the second beat of the second half-line can be used instead, or alternatively, all four beats in the line, though the latter was generally quite rare and can become excessive.

Glory escaping**, *g***athering ***gl***oom
Hearken the ***h***oofbeats, ***h***earken the ***h***orn

Often, poems contain all three examples. (Samples above marked with * are taken from JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*)

Kennings

What is a kenning? Here is the definition from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

A metaphorical compound word or phrase (as swan-road *for* ocean*) used especially in Old English and Old Norse poetry*

The kenning is useful for a number of reasons. The first reason is because it allows for alliteration in lines where the normal word for a thing would not be useable. For example, "sky candle" for sun would allow the concept of "sun" to fit in a line not just with an s-alliteration, but also c/k-alliteration as well. There were traditional kennings accepted for common words, such as "whale-road" or "gannet's bath" for sea. These "stock phrases" act in many ways in the same fashion as Homeric epithets in ancient Greek heroic verse; they can be place-holders, ready-known, to fill the needs of meter or plot while the poet remembers (or creates!) the next part of the line. They provide a grounding of repetition and familiarity to the poem that allow it to flow. We are not, in modern English, so very used to kennings, and they can be difficult to fit into a verse or might not make sense to a particular audience. That said, kennings provide a certain "authenticity" to the sound of a poem/song, and they add spice to the language. They can also help you, the composer, fit themes into a difficult spot. Just know, though, that in Anglo-Saxon verse, kennings are neither used as much nor as well-developed as in Old Norse poetry, so you are best off to use them judiciously and sparingly.

Themes

The themes used in Anglo-Saxon alliterative were varied, ranging from the historic to the legendary, and from the profound to the silly, and pretty much anywhere in between. Therefore, pretty much any theme is acceptable for Anglo-Saxon styled verse; indeed, it

can be a challenging and new way to express themes and ideas you might normally put to another style of verse. That said, there are a few themes that one might more commonly find in the Anglo-Saxon style:

-war and battle (legendary or historical)
-the heroic ideal
-social relations (between lord and warrior, king and subject, husband and wife, etc)
-religious themes
-riddles
-historic events not covered by war and battle
-laments

Singing

We really don't have a great deal of information of description of how Anglo-Saxon verse was performed, but what little we do have suggests that it could be spoken, sung, or chanted, so you can make use of any of these for your work. One note though, is that we only have one example of a poem with a refrain, which is Deor. Refrains/choruses don't seem very common, so you do not have to include one.

Examples

Deor

Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade,
anhydig eorl earfoþa dreag,
hæfde him to gesiþþe sorge ond longaþ,
wintercealde wræce; wean oft onfond,
siþþan hine Niðhad on nede legde,
swoncre seonobende on syllan monn.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

Beadohilde ne wæs hyre broþra deaþ
on sefan swa sar swa hyre sylfre þing,
þæt heo gearolice ongieten hæfde
þæt heo eacen wæs; æfre ne meahte
þriste geþencan, hu ymb þæt sceolde.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

We þæt Mæðhilde monge gefrugnon
wurdon grundlease Geates frige,
þæt hi seo sorglufu slæp ealle binom.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!
ðeodric ahte þritig wintra
Mæringa burg; þæt wæs monegum cuþ.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

We geascodan Eormanrices
wylfenne geþoht; ahte wide folc
Gotena rices. þæt wæs grim cyning.
Sæt secg monig sorgum gebunden,
wean on wenan, wyscte geneahhe
þæt þæs cynerices ofercumen wære.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

Siteð sorgcearig, sælum bidæled,
on sefan sweorceð, sylfum þinceð
þæt sy endeleas earfoða dæl.
Mæg þonne geþencan, þæt geond þas woruld
witig dryhten wendeþ geneahhe,
eorle monegum are gesceawað,
wislicne blæd, sumum weana dæl.
þæt ic bi me sylfum secgan wille,
þæt ic hwile wæs Heodeninga scop,
dryhtne dyre. Me wæs Deor noma.
Ahte ic fela wintra folgað tilne,
holdne hlaford, oþþæt Heorrenda nu,
leoðcræftig monn londryht geþah,
þæt me eorla hleo ær gesealde.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

– Anonymous, online copy at https://www.heorot.dk/deor.html.

“Ride of the Rohirrim”
From dark Dunharrow in the dim morning
with thane and captain rode Thengel's son:
to Edoras he came, the ancient halls
of the Mark-wardens mist-enshrouded;
golden timbers were in gloom mantled.
Farewell he bade to his free people,
hearth and high-seat, and the hallowed places,
where long he had feasted ere the light faded.
Forth rode the king, fear behind him,
fate before him. Fealty kept he;
oaths he had taken, all fulfilled them.
Forth rode Théoden. five nights and days
east and onward rode the Eorlingas
through Folde and Fenmarch and the Firienwood,
six thousand spears to Sunlending,
Mundburg the mighty under Mindolluin,
Sea-kings; city in the South-kingdom
foe-beleaguered, fire-encircled.
Doom drove them on. Darkness took them,
horse and horseman; hoofbeats afar
sank into silence; so the songs tell us.

– J.R.R Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*

She Will Hear You
She will hear you, hear the loud din
The crush and clash and cry of battle
Beer-tables broken, benches upturned
As fell and fierce the foe you grapple
Does shout and scream and shake the ground
As rending, ripping, reaching for you
His luck is lost. And lost as well
His arm, his bone, his baneful claw
Now moaning, dying, mere-ward he goes
You tongue will tell the tale of battle
She will hear you. And she will come.

– Hilla Stormbringer

Alliterative stress patterns (does not include unstressed syllables)
Key: __ = non-alliterated beat, X = alliterated beat, // = half-line

1st-3rd	X __ // X __
2nd - 3rd	__ X // X __
1st-2nd-3rd	X X // X __
All (not in general use)	X X // X X

Riddles

What is a riddle? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Yes, I use this a lot because I can copy and paste from it online.) defines “riddle” as:

a mystifying, misleading, or puzzling question posed as a problem to be solved or guessed.

It is notable that our word for riddle is related to the Anglo-Saxon word for interpret, *rædan*, because that is, in a way, what we do to solve a riddle: we interpret meaning and intent and language used to puzzle out what is meant by the riddle.

We are most familiar in modern times with the humorous riddle in the form of question-answer, complete with puns and wordplay. These range from puns like:

“When is a door not a door? When it’s ajar.”
“Why is six afraid of seven? Because seven eight nine.”

to

“What is yours but your friend uses more than you do? Your name.”

These are perfectly valid forms of riddles, but they are not the style of riddles we are talking about. Anglo-Saxon riddles are longer and more enigmatic, less of a joke and far more a puzzle or mystery to be solved. They are specifically written in Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, and told in various different forms with varying subjects, which range from ecclesiastical to mundane to martial to sexually suggestive. Almost all of the Anglo-Saxon riddles we have are contained in the Exeter Book, with no authorship listed nor reason given for their inclusion. We don’t even know clearly what function riddles had in Anglo-Saxon society. Perhaps one word for a bard, “laughter-smith”, is one suggestion, and these riddles were told for entertainment. There are examples in Icelandic sagas of riddling-matches, and in the Poetic Edda of wit-matches, but there is no clear extrapolation to Anglo-Saxon usage. Perhaps they were sources of entertainment on long winters’ nights, games of wit to play with one another.

The construction of the Anglo-Saxon riddle consists of two parts. The first is the verse-form in and of itself, which is, as noted, Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse. The second part of this construction is the telling of the riddle itself, which can be best described as going from general to specific, broad to narrow. It makes an opening statement, and then whittles down the answers by descriptions, comparisons, and contrasts until an answer can be found.

Notably, there is no answer-key in the Exeter Book, and the riddles are not spaced apart, so the answers are conjecture, as are the distinctions, at times, between the end of one riddle and the beginning of the next.

When it comes to subject-matter, the variety was broad. Some of the riddles in the Exeter Book seem to have been copied over from Roman sources, and others seem to have been original to the Anglo-Saxons. They cover topics from the mundane to the sublime, from war to peace, from innocent to erotic. Some were plays on words and meant to be spoken aloud, and others were written with a clear knowledge of spelling

and writing in mind. They were presented in a number of different ways, providing the guesser with more challenges.

Categories of riddles: (Pollington, pp. 211-212)

Riddles can be categorized by the way they are presented, by the method which their subject is characterized. It is not the subject specifically we are describing, but what it is presented as. Hence, if a mail-shirt were presented as if it were a person, it would be anthropomorphic.

Biomorphic: Subject is compared to a living creature or its body parts.
Zoomorphic: Subject is presented as an animal.
Anthropomorphic: Subject is presented as a person.
Phytomorphic: Subject is presented as a plant.
Inanimate: Subject is presented as an inanimate object.
Multiple: Serial, unrelated comparisons of various types.
Selected Details: Detailed and selective descriptions of the subject, often deceptive.
Neck-Riddle: Answer known only to the riddle-asker. Unusual and technically unsolvable. Often asked to end contest in which loser will die, hence "neck-riddle."
Arithmetical: Subject described in arithmetic, numeric terms. Not really A-S form.
Family Relations: Subject is presented in terms of its family relations.
Cryptomorphic: Answer is coded in the text, spelled with runes, jumbled, etc.
Homonymic: Answer is word with more than one meaning.
Erotic: Subject is presented in terms of a double-entendre, with a straightforward and an erotic solution both possible.

Riddle 25: (Porter, p. 45)
I am a wondrous thing, woman's delight
Handy in the home, I harm no
Householder but him who hurts me.
My stalk is tall, I stand in bed
My root rather hairy. The haughty girl
Churl's gorgeous daughter,
Sometimes has courage to clasp me,
Rushes my redness, rapes my head,
Stows me in her stronghold. Straightway
The curly-locked maiden who clamps me
Weeps at our wedding. Wet is her eye.

Riddle 21: (Porter, p. 39)
My beak bends down: deep I travel
And engrave ground, go as the grey
Forest-foe guides me, and my master,
The guard at my tail goes stooping,
Wrenches, thrusts, and drives me through the field,
Sows in my wake. I snuffle forth
Brought from the wood, bound skillfully,
Fetched by the wagon, I am full of wonders;
On one side my track is green,
And my trail pure black on the other.

Driven through my spine a skillful spear
Hangs down, in my head another,
Fixed and forward-jutting. What I tear with teeth
Falls aside, if from behind
He who is my master serves me well.

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Hilla Stormbringer
hilla@bardicproject.org