

## TAKING TIME OUT: LEARNING FROM THE EARLIEST POETRY IN ENGLISH

by John Greening

### RIDDLES

Have a look at some of the translations of Anglo-Saxon Riddles in *The Word Exchange* ed. Delanty & Matto or at [www.abdn.ac.uk/sll/disciplines/english/beowulf/riddle.htm](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/sll/disciplines/english/beowulf/riddle.htm)

There is a riddling quality to much recent English poetry, particularly the so-called Martian school of the 1980s. You find yourself asking 'what is it?' Take Craig Raine's 'A Martian Sends a Postcard Home', for instance. Try a riddle poem of no more than six lines, in the first person.

### ACCENTUAL VERSE

Accentual verse has its origins in Anglo Saxon but is essential to much later poetry in English, particularly the border ballads. Gerard Manley Hopkins explored a rather over-complex version of it with his 'sprung rhythm'. Even Shakespeare inclines to it in his later work. Nowadays it is just one of the many options. It is verse which counts a set number of stressed syllables in a line, ignoring those unstressed. It works as the lyrics of a song might, squeezing words in between the beats. T S Eliot saw it as an alternative to blank verse for his dramas, but also used it in poems:

The river sweats  
Oil and tar  
The barges drift  
With the turning tide

This (from 'The Waste Land') uses a two-stress line with occasional variations for effect. Seamus Heaney adopted a four-stress line in his recent version of 'Beowulf':

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed  
offerings to idols, swore oaths  
that the killer of souls might come to their aid  
and save the people. That was their way,  
their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts  
they remembered hell.

Counting stresses opens all kinds of possibilities as a line can vary extraordinarily in length and yet still follow the rules. It provides a useful middle ground between formal, metred verse and free verse. Using four stresses to a line, write a poem in which you imagine a walk with someone from history, or put a historical figure in an incongruous setting: Donne in Tesco's, Mozart on 'I'm a celebrity'... If this doesn't appeal, try retelling or interpreting a myth or fairy-tale. Or if you're quite stuck, go to your local museum, select something that appeals and start writing ... counting the stressed syllables may well release something unexpected. For further inspiration, read Charles Tomlinson, who uses this form a great deal: [www.poetryarchive.org/poet/charles-tomlinson](http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/charles-tomlinson)

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### MACARONIC VERSE

The poet William Dunbar (1465-1530) is one of several medieval poets to use this technique of incorporating a repeated foreign phrase into a poem. 'Lament for the Makaris' is not quite a foreign language itself; the Latin (the fear of death troubles me) still works powerfully against the Scots. See [Lament for the Makaris - Bartleby.com](#). Here are the opening stanzas of twenty-five:

I that in heill wes and gladnes,  
Am trublit now with gret seiknes,  
And feblit with infermite;  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

Our pleasance heir is all vane glory,  
This fals world is bot transitory,  
The flesch is brukle, the Fend is sle;  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

The stait of man dois change and vary,  
Now sound, now seil, now blith, now sary,  
Now dansand mery, now like to dee;  
*Timor mortis conurbat me ...*

Try writing a macaronic poem. If you wish, you can follow Dunbar's pattern of three lines and a fourth in another language, but a steady rhythm is most effective here. Pick any phrase in any language that means something to you. To get you going, begin with what the following words make you think of: *birthplace, zoo, sky, regret, hero, memory.*

### THE MEDIEVAL PORTRAIT

Chaucer's portraits of people are justly celebrated. The *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* is full of sharply observed, often satirical portraits. (See: [Chaucer: The General Prologue - An Interlinear Translation](#).) This is something we have rather overlooked in poetry in recent years, though Pound and Eliot did their own versions of it. What Chaucer does is take all the characteristic 'types' of his age and portray them with gentle irony. You could try doing something similar with typical 'professions' of our own era ... try it in rhyming couplets.

### RHYME ROYAL

Rhyme Royal is seven lines of iambic pentameter in ababbcc: effective in narrative and great potential for wit, made famous by Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*:

The wrath, as I bigan yow for to seye,  
Of Troilus the Grekis boughten deere,  
For thousandes his hondes maden deye,  
As he that was withouten any peere  
Save Ector, in his tyme, as I kan heere.  
But weilaway – save only Goddes wille –  
Despitously hyn slough the fierse Achille.

... and also used entertainingly by Auden in his [Letter to Lord Byron](#) - a long poem which begins ...

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I'm writing this in pencil on my knee,  
 Using my other hand to stop me yawning,  
 Upon a primitive, unsheltered quay  
 In the small hours of a Wednesday morning.  
 I cannot add the summer day is dawning:  
 In Seythisfjördur every schoolboy knows  
 That delight in the summer never goes...

John Haynes's *You* and N S Thompson's *Letter to Auden* are books entirely in this form: it is good for letters, for conversation. Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' uses it with a hexameter final line. If such disguised formality appeals, try your own 'Letter to ...': to someone you feel strongly about or someone from history whom you would like to engage with. Or, like Wordsworth, write about an unexpected encounter with a stranger.

### BOB AND WHEEL

Bob and Wheel is most famously used in [Sir Gawain and the Green Knight](#) - this is the knack of using a very short line (often only two syllables) at the end of each stanza – the 'bob' (the name is from bell-ringing). The 'wheel' is a set of shorter lines following it. This extract from *Gawain* shows the shift from the long (alliterative) line:

... And all nikked him with nay, that never in her live  
 Thay seye never no segge that was of such hewes  
 of grene.  
 The knight toke gates straunge  
 In mony a bonk unbene;  
 His chere ful off con chaunge  
 That chapel ere he myght sene.

So what use is this to a modern poet? Simon Armitage reproduces the style effectively enough in his modern translation. But others have taken it out of the medieval context. Hardy, for instance, in 'His Visitor':

I come across from Mellstock while the moon wastes weaker  
 To behold where I lived with you for twenty years and more:  
 I shall go in the gray, at the passing of the mail-train,  
 And need no setting open of the long familiar door  
 As before.

Some of Yeats' refrains are almost in the same mould, but to be effective the bob and wheel should continue the forward motion of the poem rather than stopping everything as Yeats' do. In 'The Hummingbirds', Adam Thorpe contrasts a very long and a very short line:

You fill the feeder with sugared water and sure enough  
 they come

out of the woods, tiny bright vowels on the edge  
 of becoming

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words murmured in sleep that amaze or something never said...

It's a rather self-conscious potentially artificial effect, but might suit certain themes.

### ALLEGORY

*Allegory - Examples and Definition of Allegory: a figurative narrative or description, conveying a veiled moral meaning; an extended metaphor*

Popular in Chaucer's day, allegory flowered during the Elizabethan period with Edmund Spenser's commentary on the age, *The Faerie Queene*, full of personified abstract qualities. It has since become a useful way of criticizing without being seen to, much used by Soviet and Eastern European poets (see Zbigniew Herbert). Heaney experimented with it in the 1980s, making a border crossing allegorical of the poetic process: '... So you drive on to the frontier of writing/where it happens again. The guns on tripods;/The sergeant with his on-off mike repeating//data about you, waiting for the squawk/of clearance; the marksman training down/out of the sun upon you like a hawk...'

The allegorical journey is the most common choice (Browning's 'Childe Roland', Tennyson's 'Ulysses') and often developed into long poems or sequences by twentieth-century writers (MacNeice's *The Dark Tower*, George Mackay Brown's *Fishermen with Ploughs*, Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune*, Tony Harrison's *The Gaze of the Gorgon*). The parallels between the journey from birth to death and a walk, a climb, even a drive, have been much exploited. My own recent booklet *Knot* allegorizes Ben Jonson's walk from London to Scotland into a journey through time.

Choose a journey and describe it allegorically. It could be a local walk or just the ritual of making a cup of tea ... but in your poem it must represent something bigger. You can use personification. All poetry is to some extent allegorical; it is worth seeing how far you can push the technique. If you are stuck, try one of these titles, perhaps ranging beyond the journey:

- The Voyage to [add an abstract noun: love, boredom, beauty ...]
- The Battle of ...[?]
- The Discovery of [?]

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