LARGER PATTERNS OF SYNTAX IN MIDDLE ENGLISH UNRHYMED ALLITERATIVE VERSE

In punctuating Middle English long line unrhymed alliterative verse, far more than in punctuating the works of Chaucer or Gower or any non-alliterative rhymed romance, editors are frequently dealing with syntactic patterns which do not easily conform to modern preconceptions about the sentence. This has led to a striking number of meaningful differences in punctuation from edition to edition of individual poems,[1] and sometimes to a view of their syntax as orally based and therefore inadequate on the printed page.[2] More specialised study has demonstrated the artistry behind some aspects of alliterative syntax,[3] but little has been done in a general way to characterise the distinctive quality of the larger patterns of M.E. alliterative verse syntax, or to relate that distinctive quality to the metrical conditions of the alliterative form. This article is intended to be a first step in this direction. By offering some generalisations about the larger patterns of M.E. alliterative verse syntax, I would hope to show something of their inter-relatedness with the long line form, and to stimulate further discussion and analysis.[4]

Certain broad features of the syntax of M.E. unrhymed alliterative poems are easily stated. Each clause, each half-line, has the potential to be its own "sentence" irrespective of syntactic co-ordination. The sentence, as we define it, is not necessarily an absolute unit: the need for syntactic co-ordination is a counterbalance to the need for metrical co-ordination. Alliterative poise need not be a matter of commas, particles, or strict delineation of subordination in reference. In this respect, alliterative verse is freer than rhymed verse, since the rhyming couplet, if it is to be effective, must more often than not correspond with an isolable and complete sense-unit. Rhyming couplets impose a rough-and-ready periodicity. Neither M.E. alliterative verse nor M.E. prose has any formal reason to encounter such regular syntactic constraint. In other words, the unrhymed long line form need not enforce a rigid distinction between sentence and clause.

Hypotaxis is prevalent, however, in most of the speeches in M.E. alliterative verse. In *Sir Gawain*, for instance, Gawain is able to render hollow the lady's victory in their initial skirmish by a quality of syntactic precision which, despite the ellipsis of line 1304, *And fire*, restricts his commitment to the third person:

> I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a kny3t fallez,
> And fire, lest he displese yow, [so] plede hit no more.
> (*Sir Gawain*, 1303-4)

In this poem, the speech of the guide (2091-2162) is composed of two

complex sentences as tight as any modern grammarian could desire. Gawain's revelation of his identity at Hautdesert (901-14) is tightly controlled in its extensive subordination and complex construction. The king's speech in *Patience* (385-404) is a neat and ordered sequential structure. The above examples, like most speeches in alliterative verse, are meticulously constructed, and are easily – and acceptably – punctuated by modern editors. Variations from a basically hypotactic speech-structure often appear to be calculated for the sake of a deliberate effect. In Sir Bertilak's final revelation of his identity, and his explanation of the machinations of Morgan la Fay (*Sir Gawain* 2245-62), the dramatic possibilities of alternate parataxis and hypotaxis are exploited. From the first mention of Morgan's name, suspense is maintained by ten lines of clausal inconsequence and a chain of imperfectly subordinated subordinate clauses (2446-55), before the final hypotactic definition of Morgan's exact role and purposes (2456-62).

Generally, the attention paid by alliterative poets to the hypotactic representation of complex spoken rhetoric may indicate the effect of Latin models. In some cases, this may be attributable directly to Latin sources, and to the familiarity with Latin, including of course the Vulgate, shown by many poems in the alliterative corpus. In most cases, more probably, the hypotactic representation of spoken rhetoric is a habit attributable to the influence of *dictamen*. There are other distinct signs of Latinate influence on the syntax of alliterative verse. The "absolute construction" in the poems of Brit. Lib. MS Cotton Nero A x, for example, appears paratactic but may be an attempt to simulate in English hypotactic Latin ablative absolute.[5] Over extended periods, many constructions which are not obviously hypotactic may depend upon hypotactic Latin prose models. Such a period is the description of the animals'' departure from the ark in *Cleanness* (529-39):

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529  þen watჳ a skylly skynalde, quen scaped alle þe wylde:
     Vche fowle to þe flyჳt þat fyþerez myჳt serue,
531  Vche fysch to þe flod þat fynne couþe nayte,
     Vche beste to þe bent þat bytes on erbeჳ;
533  Wylde wormeჳ to her won wryþeჳ in þe erþe,
     þe fox & þe folmarde to þe fryth wyndeჳ,
535  Herrtes to hyჳe heþe, hares to gorsteჳ,
     & lyouneჳ & lebardeჳ to þe lake-ryftes;
537  Herneჳ & hauekeჳ to þe flod hyჳe rocheჳ,
     þe hole foted fowle to þe flod hyჳeჳ,
539  & vche best at a brayde þer hym best lykeჳ.
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This, in rhetorical terms, is carefully wrought; the anaphora and syntactic parallelism of lines 530-2 recurs, with significant b-verse variation, to terminate the construction in line 539. The whole passage relies on the loose reference in turn of three verbs of motion: *scaped* (529), *wyndeჳ* (534), and *hyჳeჳ* (538). This is a syntactic resource somewhat unusual in M.E. but one of frequent occurrence in Latin, and accessible to any poet

with a knowledge of Latin prose. Similar constructions are common,
especially in *St. Erkenwald.* Line 54 of that poem:

> Bot alle muset hit to mouthe, & quat hit mene schulde

may be an acceptably loose idiomatic construction, or it may be an
attempt, as in Latin, to alternate constructions dependent on a verb of
indirect question, *muset.* More evidently Latinate is the account of the
speculations of workmen and onlookers after the opening of the tomb:

> 93 þer was spedeles space to spyr vschon oþir
>   Quat body hit myȝt be þat buried was ther;
> 95 How long had he þer layne, his lere so vnchaungit,
>   & al his wede unwemmyd – þus ylka weghe askyd.
> 97 "Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in mynde stode long."
> (93-7)[6]

Line 97, with its implied double negative and third person past subjunctive
tense, is syntactically complex, yet immediately comprehensible and
direct. The whole construction, passing – as I read it – from indirect
(94-6) to direct (97ff.) question, is dependent on the economical two-way
reference of line 96b, *þus ylka weghe askyde,* which supports the *spyr* of
line 93 and introduces the switch to direct speech. Again, it would seem
that the construction depends on a knowledge of Latin constructions.

   Such syntax allows for several lines which are only loosely periodic,
provided that they are held together in a large periodic construction by
the operation of key verbs, which may be some lines apart. If this type of
syntactic procedure is in part attributable to Latin origins, it is eminently
adaptable to the form and stichic progression of M.E. alliterative verse.
The summary narrative in *St. Erkenwald* of the building of St. Paul's is
not evidently Latinate, but depends on the same principle.

> 39 Mony a mery mason was made þer to wyrke,
>   Harde stones for to hewe wyt eggit toles;
> 41 Mony grubber in grete þe grounde for to seche
>   þat þe fundement on fyrst shuld þe fote halde.
> (39-42)

This is a parallel construction in which the syntactic motion is crabwise.
It consists of the interweaving of passive (factitive) main verbs with active
subordinate verbs, including a shift in both subject of the main clause and
object of parallel subordinate clauses (line 41), which remains dependent
on the *was made* of line 39. The construction is gathered together in a
subordinate clause of purpose in line 42.

   The principle allows for a blending of hypotaxis and parataxis, of tight
and loose constructions, over extended periods. A good illustration of
this is the description of the *ferlyest freke* in *Winner and Waster*:

111 He laped his legges in yren to the lawe bones,
    With pysayne & with pawnce polischede full clene,
113 With brases of broun stele brauden full thikke,
    With plates buklede at þe bakke þe body to ȝeme,
115 With a jupown full juste, joynede by the sydes:
    A brod chechun at þe bakke; þe breste had anoþer;
117 Thre wynges in-with, wroghte in the kynde,
    Vmbygon with a gold wyre. When I þat gome knewe,
119 What, he was ȝongeste of ȝeris, and ȝapeste of witt,
    þat any wy in this werlde wiste in his age!
(111-120)

After the declarative statement of line 111, there is a parallelism of sub-ordinate constructions, varied rhythmically, to the end of line 115, with a subordinate parallelism of 112b and 113b, varied slightly in the ad-verbial phrase *by the sydes* of line 115b and interrupted by the sub-ordinate clause of purpose in 114b. At 116a the prepositional parallelism breaks down, and the poet reverts to what may be styled a note-form syntax, in which there is no main verb, with an unco-ordinate main clause in the b-verse linked by sense and form. The same looseness of co-ordination continues to the end of 118a. The form of 118b-120 is os-tensibly hypotactic,

When ... he was ... þat,

but there is little real relation between the subordinate clause of 118b and the rest of the sequence, and the alliteration tries to compensate with the subsidiary alliteration of *when* and *what.* There is no question but that the syntax of this description is a mélange, yet it is both controlled and clear.

Such syntax is typical of alliterative description or narrative, in its resolution of the conflicts of periodicity, which attempts to give shape to relatively large units, and a line which is both heavily end-stopped and not infrequently inclined to break at the caesura into two half-lines. In long lines which do not require a syntactic break, the caesura only ob-scures syntax when its own metrical position is problematic. Thus in *Sir Gawain* (479-80)

þer alle men for meruayl myȝt on hit loke,
And bi trewe tytel þerof to telle þe wonder ...

the particle *þerof* may refer to the *tytel* or the *wonder*: the syntactic ambiguity is really a metrical ambiguity. The tendency of the line to be end-stopped is less easily overcome. Enjambement, which in all verse is mainly motivated by syntactic considerations, occurs rarely in formal alliterative verse.[7] Its absence would seem to point at a syntactic pattern that proceeds by means of phrasal and clausal aggregation rather than by tightly developed sentences; also the fierce end-stopping tends to break (and to brake) the b-verse, which is reduced from its prime place in Old

English as the unit of syntactic continuity to a basically temporising, reiterative function capable of conveying little narrative movement. However, when rhyme is added to the b-verse, it is immediately reinvigorated, for the block at the end of the line becomes a key-word, not a silence, is positive not negative, a climax rather than a cessation.

The relative and related systems of parataxis and hypotaxis are empirically operative, and most of the syntactic structures of alliterative poets are a compromise between the two theoretical extremes.[8] On the one hand, alliterative poets had the resources of hypotaxis, the ability to build a complex clause-series, with one main clause and possible secondary main clauses, and a "more-or-less elaborate system of predominant sub-clauses";[9] on the other, they had the resources of intonation and oral emphasis so that, for example, a question may be asked not in terms of its superficial structure, a reshuffled word-order, but by the normal declarative sequence appropriately intoned. In the middle, alliterative poets possessed the full range of the compound clause series – short main clauses either syndetically or asyndetically co-ordinate, with a punctuation system which isolated and emphasised the line and half-line units.

Within these metrical units, rhythmical considerations affect word-order and the shape of particular constructions in terms of stressed and unstressed syllabic patterns. Hence, the inverted word-order of *Cleanness* 839

> Wyth kene clobbeȝ of þat clos þay clatȝ on þe woweȝ,

a typically alliterative pattern in wich the a-verse is an adverbial phrase and the b-verse supplies the main verb, is the answer to metrical requirements in its strengthening of the b-verse. Had the *St. Erkenwald* poet indulged in a little syntactic reshuffling, he would have had no need to invert in line 63:

> þer commen þider of alle kynnes so kenely mony.

He inverts because a tendency to invert for rhythmical reasons is habitual, and because inversion is an ornament of style. The inversion of line 25 of *Sir Gawain* may be rhythmically inspired, but rhythmical and syntactic considerations go hand in hand:

> Bot of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges,
> Ay watȝ Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle.
> (25-6)

The syntactic design of the two lines is such that the two a-verse contain the main substance of the sentence, and the b-verse are temporising and subordinate. Here syntactic structure appears to be dominant over rhyth-

mical alignment. The reverse appears to be true of the essentially tem-
porising syntax of lines 196-7:

> Such a fole vpon folde, ne freke þat hym rydes,
> Watȝ neuer sene in þat sale wyth syȝt er þat tyme.

The syntax is the poet's method of slowing down a strophe of quick
tempo into the bob-and-wheel, while preserving the sense and form of
two long lines. This degree of rhythmical conditioning of word-order
would make formal M.E. alliterative verse a poor corpus from which to
draw examples for a more general study of M.E. syntax and word-order.

Syntax is an element of style not only as a condition of all articulate
utterance, but in its relation to the formalised nature of alliterative
rhythm: syntax itself, within the unit of one long line, is formalised to
meet the demands of metre. Alliterative poets use a limited number of
rhythmical patterns, and this self-imposed limitation, in any form of
composition, is liable to result in the development of several formalised
syntactic patterns either to correspond to or to coincide with the rhyth-
mical patterns. In his respect, formalised syntax is an instrument to faci-
litate the composition of any alliterative long line. Alliterative poets use
both rhythmical and syntactic formalisation in half-lines, and to a lesser
extent, in full lines; in a significant number of cases, the rhythmical types
and syntactic moulds coincide in a stable combination; and some of these
patterns, especially when they are both rhythmical and syntactic, are used
with such emphasis and with sufficiently frequent recurrence as to con-
stitute isolable features of style.[10] It must also be apparent that where an
alliterative collocation occurs in a set syntactic mould or rhythmical-
syntactic pattern, it achieves a special degree of formality. The formulaic
charge of such a combination, supported both lexically and formally,
would be a powerful and important part of a structural pattern of
evocation.

The treatment of larger patterns in formal M.E. alliterative verse is a
consequence of unrhymed and stichic form. In a transitional period of
the language, a particular verse-form exerts far stronger influence over
syntax than in a period of static and established usage. Reference has
already been made to the fact that verse in the form of rhyming couplets
must reach a syntactic accommodation different from that of alliterative
verse, and that in the M.E. period the accommodation reached for rhym-
ing couplets may conform, fortuitously, to our stricter notions of perio-
dicity. This observation may be extended, I think, to any genuinely strop-
hic poetic form,[11] and I offer here three examples, one Chaucerian, one
from the stanzaic rhymed alliterative poem the *Awntyrs off Arthure,* and
one from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* which uniquely combines
stichic and strophic qualities.

The Chaucerian example consists of two passages from *Troilus and*

Criseyde.[12] When in Book II Pandarus makes his first visit to Criseyde on Troilus' behalf, he finds Criseyde at home hearing *a mayden* read the story of the siege of Thebes. Pandarus is anxious to turn the conversation from literature to life:

> But lat be this, and telle me how ye fare.
> Do wey youre barbe and shewe youre face bare.
> Do wey youre book ...   (II, 109-11)

The syntactic parallelism, as commonly in rhymed verse the tailoring of one line to its immediate predecessor, highlighted by verbal repetition (*Do wey youre ...*), serves to establish a tension relating to the words *barbe* and *book*. The tension is near to the heart of a poem in which a fictional book by a spurious author, Lollius, is drawn as a veil by Chaucer over the issue of Criseyde's moral responsibility, and therefore her personality. It is the duty of the critic solemnly to explicate the proximity of *barbe* and *book*; the poet's verbal actions – here, his syntax – touch delicately on a complex conceptual area which the critic has no alternative but to grasp. Similarly, a tenuous identification of Criseyde and Fortune is hinted at many times in the poem, but is never a matter for explicit reference. The last occasion for it is a *tour de force* of syntactic parallelism:

> 1744   Gret was the sorwe and pleynte of Troilus;
>   But forth hire cours Fortune ay gan to holde.
> 1746   Criseyde loveth the sone of Tideus,
>   And Troilus moot wepe in cares colde.
> 1748   Swich is this world, whoso it kan byholde:
>   In ech estat is litel hertes reste.
> 1750   God leve us for to take it for the beste!
> (V 1744-50)

In this case, I have reproduced the whole stanza, and – like almost all the stanzas of the poem – it is a complete unit, both of sense and syntax. Since the stanza is also, by definition, a complete unit in metrical terms, it is here, as often, a matter of necessity that the poet should counterbalance at least two sub-units of sense and syntax in order to reach a conclusion dense in texture. The reference for *Swich* (line 1748) is flexible, suggesting not only a movement from the general (1745) to the particular (1746-7, and also the first line of the stanza, 1744), back to the general, but also an inextricable coalescence of the two. The simple parallelism of declarative sentences in 1745-6 (*Fortune ... Criseyde ...*) is eloquent on a level which is poetic if by poetic we mean the capacity to intimate without overt equations. If anything, the parallelism would gain from the absence, in a medieval manuscript, of the discriminations in weight made by the various symbols of modern punctuation. The pressure of rhymed stanzaic verse, with a local *terminus ad quem* always in sight, combines

with the pressure of Chaucer's ambiguous insight to produce a syntax more recognisably, and perhaps misleadingly, modern than that of most alliterative verse. We may also note, however, that the form of alliterative verse is at least as conducive to syntactic parallelism as rhyme-royal, and that the syntactic parallelism in *Troilus and Criseyde* reveals a capacity in M.E. poetry for making, by means of syntax, points which in later poetry we should expect to be made by imagery.

In the case of the *Awntyrs off Arthure,* the demands of end-rhyme radically reshape the syntactic structure of the alliterative long line, and the demands of the strophe introduce a characteristically rhymed syntax in the wheel. The change in the structure of the long line may be shown in three particularly clear examples, lines 508, 604 and 628. In line 508

<div align="center">Gawayne was gaily graþed in grene</div>

we have a sequence which is almost too smooth for an alliterative long line; the caesura, although not *per se* a syntactic juncture, is usually accorded greater respect than this suspension of an adverb from the past participle it modifies. In line 604

<div align="center">þorgh þe riche mailes þat ronke were and rounde</div>

there is no real caesura. If we place a caesura after *ronke,* which is un-likely, the b-verse is virtually lost. If we place a caesura after *mailes* and read the line as an *ax/aa* pattern, the b-verse, with the coincidence of stress, alliteration and rhyme on its last element, has also too strong a rhyming metrical lilt. In line 628

<div align="center">And I þi wife, wedded at þi owne wille</div>

the same problem about a caesura applies. The syntax serves to abolish the caesura as even a metrical pause, and with it the notion of two inter-acting half-lines. The extent to which the wheel assumes a characteristi-cally rhymed syntax may be shown from the first wheel of the poem. In this wheel, the *terminus ad quem* is so clearly always in sight, that it is almost prematurely anticipated at the end of line 11:

<div align="center">

9 Thus to wode arn þei went, þe wlonkest in wedes,
Bothe þe kyng and þe quene
11 And al þe dougheti by-dene;
Sir Gawayne, gayest on grene,
13 Dame Gaynour he ledes.   (9-13)

</div>

We find a typical alliterative inversion in line 9, an inversion which occurs not because it would have been impossible to write a line like

> Thus þe wlonkest in wedes to wode arn þei went,

but because the demands of rhyme harmonise well with the predilection of alliterative poets for allowing the caesura to mark where possible a clausal or phrasal juncture, and another for placing a nominal group appositionally in the b-verse.[13] The inversion gives way in line 13 to the type of repetition of subject pronoun which is inseparable from the demands of a rhymed metrical swing, especially where in this last line of the stanza there is no internal alliteration. Unlike most last wheel lines (e.g. *And broughte to þe blys,* line 221), the poet must therefore resolve his two stresses into three, in which the combined stress of *Dame ... he ledes* balances that of *Gaynour.* The change in syntax is not accompanied by a strong indication of change in form. Lines 12-13 as one line would meet the requirements for a hypermetric long line, and the nature of the wheel in the rhymed alliterative poems is shown to be ambivalent – it is based on the structure of the half-line, the effect and syntactic structure of which is drastically affected by end-rhyme.

The wheel of *Sir Gawain,* on the other hand, is syllabic. Syntactically, it is generally hypotactic, and corresponds with the more "modern" structures of Chaucer's stanzas. After Gawain has accepted the green lace, made confession, and relaxed with the ladies, the wheel (1889-92) adds:

> Vche mon had daynté þare
> Of hym, and sayde, "Iwysse,
> þus myry he watȝ neuer are,
> Syn he com hider, er þis."

The enjambement of lines 1889-90 is an exercise in syntactic precision, extending itself over the syllabic limitations of the wheel line. The last phrase of line 1892, *er þis,* fulfils the expectation of rhyme and crystallises the clause of comparison and time of lines 1891-2:

> þus ... neuer are / Syn ... er þis.

So exact is the temporal clause that it seems almost like an insistence on time itself, and the poet gains scope to deepen the ironic contrast of his next two long lines by introducing each with a temporal conjunction:

> *Now* hym lenge in þat lee, þer luf hym bityde!
> ȝet is þe lorde on þe launde ledande his gomnes.
> (1893-4)

Temporal precision is a frequent factor in the wheel of *Sir Gawain.* In the preceding wheel (1866-9), the poet makes the most of its two simultaneous actions and the tendency of the wheel to split at the half-way point, by allowing the split to take place, leaving the rhyme-scheme to

emphasise the reciprocity of the actions, and supplying the conjunctive phrase *Bi þat* at the beginning of line 1868:

> He þonkked hir oft ful swyþe,
> Ful þro with hert and þoȝt.
> Bi þat on þrynne syþe
> Ho hatȝ kyst þe knyȝt so toȝt.

For a variety of reasons, the syntax of competent rhymed poetry is drawn to hypotaxis. The relative brevity of lines, the expectation of completeness and logicality created by rhyme, the awareness of a temporal termination of syntactic and metrical sequence, are constant factors. In the case of rhyming couplets particularly, whose progression is generally intended to be quasi-stichic, there is also a need to counteract the sense of completion by establishing continuity among what would otherwise be isolated metrical units; where enjambement is possible, a stricter measure of clausal subordination may be supplied than copulative co-ordination. Furthermore, in Chaucer and the wheel of *Sir Gawain*, word-order may be consciously idiomatic as a sign of the poet's control over the artificiality of rhyme.

In unrhymed long line alliterative verse, greater and more flexible line length, combined with a decline in metrical impetus in the x-stress, leads to a regularly end-stopped line. Absence of rhyme, the need for verbal ornament within the line, may produce frequent inversion of word-order and rhythmical-syntactic formalisation. The lack of a strophic *terminus ad quem* is congenial to the blend of paratactic and hypotactic syntax already discussed. The adoption in *Sir Gawain* of an ostensibly strophic form does not affect the syntax of the unrhymed long lines, since the poet leaves himself absolute freedom to choose the timing of his bob-and-wheel. It is possible, however, that the pseudo-strophic form of the poem indicates and sharpens the poet's continual awareness of the dramatic potentiality in the interplay of parataxis and hypotaxis, and in this way draws out the full potential of the syntactic compromise dictated by the execution of stichic, unrhymed long line alliterative poems. As an illustration of this, and as a further contrast to the syntactic structures of rhyming verse shown above (and including the poem's own wheels), I examine here the lines which lead up to the wheel of line 1866. The subtlety of the lady's temptation of Gawain, and of his responses, is largely communicated by means of syntax: a syntax which operates either in hypotaxis as tortuous as the thoughts underlying it, or in parataxis the most common form of which is parallelism and incremental repetition linked by *and*. The lady's speech of lines 1508-34 is an excellent example of the variation of the two forms, as is Gawain's capitulation to the temptation of the green lace:

1855 þen kest þe kny3t, and hit come to his hert
      Hit were a juel for þe joparde þat hym iugged were;
1857 When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,
      My3t he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sle3t were noble.
1859 þenne he þulged with hir þrepe and þoled hir to speke,
      And ho bere on hym þe belt and bede hit hym swyþe–
1861 And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle –
      And biso3t hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer,
1863 Bot to lelly layne [fro] hir lorde; þe leude hym acorde3
      þat neuer wy3e schulde hit wyt, iwysse, bot þay twayne
1865   for no3te.
(*Sir Gawain* 1855-65)

The tortuous hypotactic excuse in Gawain's thoughts (1855-8) gives way to the parataxis of his actions and her importunities, to a node of his actions and her responses (with characteristic omission of the relative in 1862, smoothed by editorial parenthesis for 1861), which culminates when the knot is tied, the compact sealed, in the *þay twayne* of 1864. The inversion of 1858, which holds back the main clause until the b-verse (*þe sle3t were noble*) is both a subtle representation of the psychological process and an assistance to the alliteration, which already emphasises *sle3t* at the expense of *noble*. The emphatic oral quality of *iwysse* (1864) is undermined by the anarchic potential of the bob, *for no3te,* which is on one level another piece of reported speech, and on a second level, perhaps, a sly narratorial comment on the futility of Gawain's course of action. The string of co-ordinate clauses of lines 1859ff., held together by a succession of copulatives and wholly dependent on parallelism of clausal construction, is a veil of apparent naiveté thrown over an essentially sinister process. The direct causal relationship of excuse and action is scored by the repetition of the temporal conjunction, *þen* (1855, 1859), which acts as the bridge between the two syntactic forms.

In this extract, the anacrusis of each half-line contains every syntactic particle by which two or more half-line units are co-ordinated. This is predictable in the sense that conjunctions do not bear heavy stress and it is thus convenient to place the grammatical mechanism of syntactic co-ordination in anacrusis. Yet the regularity with which this method is applied merits attention. There is a contrast between syntactic particles in anacrusis, which co-ordinate the larger patterns of syntax, and those in the hemistich proper, which serve in a limited context to make sense of the immediate sequence. This is a uniform process throughout the un-rhymed alliterative verse corpus: the anacrusis of the half-line, containing what is metrically unimportant, is the regulator of larger syntactic organisation. The only sign in this extract that the b-verse is of lesser weight than the a-verse is that its anacrusis tends to be shorter: the b-verse, therefore, is less liable to be as active in its contribution to the larger patterns of syntax. This in turn creates an opportunity for a b-verse, especially in a long sequence, to achieve a strong ironic (or sum-

mary) effect by means of a subordinate clause relating to the last main verb in the a-verse.

In this analysis, I referred to the disciplining effect of the strophic, or pseude-strophic, form of *Sir Gawain*. I believe that other poems also display a desire to impose an arbitrary limitation on the syntactic progression of their stichic verse. Gollancz's edition of *Patience, Cleanness, and St. Erkenwald* in the form of unrhymed quatrains was inspired not so much by manuscript observation but by syntactic examination. The slanting double-line in the margin of Brit. MS Cotton Nero A x was ignored by Menner in his edition of *Cleanness* (as *Purity*), with no detriment to sense, form or felicity. There is no sign of any such strophic division in the manuscript of *St. Erkenwald*, Brit. Lib. MS Harley 2250. In no edition of an alliterative poem so executed does the division work entirely satisfactorily. The quatrain division makes little sense, in fact, as a metrical grouping, and is best seen as a useful rule-of-thumb for a poet in the adaptation of syntax to metrical demands. A period of four lines is the limit to which most poets suspended an obviously hypotactic effect. Thus *Patience* 452 gives *schet* dependent on the *Hit watȝ* of line 449; and, as Anderson points out, lines 514-15 depend on the b-verse, *disserne noȝt cunnen*, of line 513.[14] Parallelism of syntactic structure is also not postponed, in general, for more than four lines: thus the description of the corpse's purity in *St. Erkenwald* is completed by two parallel "quatrain" constructions fashioned, with anaphora, on a-verses commencing with *als* plus adjective (85, 87, 89), and culminating on whole lines which are parallel clauses of comparison, introduced by the same conjunction (88, 92):

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85 Als wemles were his wedes wyt-outen any tecche
   Oþir of moulyng oþir of motes oþir moght-freten.
87 & als bryȝt of hor blee in blysnande hewes
   As þai hade ȝepely in þat ȝorde bene ȝistur-day shapen.
89 & als freshe hyn þe face & þe fflesh nakyd
   Bi his eres & bi his hondes þat openly shewid,
91 Wyt ronke rode as þe rose & two rede lippes
   As he in sounde sodanly were slippid opon slepe.
   (85-92)
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To summarise, then: where M.E. formal unrhymed alliterative verse is most notably hypotactic over a long period, or several periods, this may in almost all cases be ascribed to Latin precedents. In most of its constructions and syntactic patterning, it is neither absolutely hypotactic nor absolutely paratactic, but a serviceable compromise between the two which is supported by the characteristic lack of definition in M.E. prose and alliterative verse – but not usually in rhymed verse – of the "sentence" as a necessary unit. In evolutionary terms, the syntax could be held to be intermediate; in artistic terms, it is flexible, even protean. M.E. alliterative poets have the capacity for strict subordination and what may

best be seen as rhetorical hypotaxis; but the main local *desideratum* is
clausal co-ordination by any means, including paratactic asyndeton, and
the accommodation of language, hence of syntax, to rhythm – the stress
patterns of the long line. This in turn gives rise to the small-scale, and
metrically based, syntactic formula. Only the best alliterative poets
escape without signs of tension in the accommodation to one another and
to sense of this gradation of techniques for syntactic patterning, but that
tension is seldom detrimental to sense or aesthetic effect, since the tech-
niques are complementary. The rhetoric demands co-ordination over a
large framework, achieved by means of conjunctions in anacrusis; the
metre demands syntactic accommodation – thus, occasionally, syntactic
disjuncture – to small and local contexts. A half-line syntactic disjuncture
does not destroy a pattern of several lines' length.

The syntax of alliterative verse is more comparable to that of prose
than of contemporary rhymed verse in its attitude to periodicity.
Admittedly, it is not really possible to generalise about M.E. prose. A
large number of M.E. prose texts are translations; the degree of periodicity
in any one text depends considerably upon that of its source. So Caxton's
translations are more hypotactic than his original Prologues.[15]
Nevertheless, in M.E. prose of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we
find, alongside indisputably hypotactic structures, other syntactic struc-
tures which are not periodic in the Latinate sense. These occur frequently
in narrative passages: from the fifteenth century, the first books of
Malory's Arthuriad may be cited as examples,[16] and from the fourteenth
century, typical narrative patterns such as the following from the *Gesta
Romanorum*:

> Folliculus was a wise Emperour regnyd in þe Cite of Rome; He
> was mercifull, and riȝtwis in his werkis, And he made a worthi
> Tour in þe Eest, in þe which he put all his tresour and
> precius Iewelis; And þe wey toward þe Cite was stony, þorny,
> and scroggy; And iij. armyd knyȝtys were in þe same wey, to fiȝte with all þat euer come in
> þat wey to þe forsaide cite.   17

It is not that this passage greatly lacks syntactic co-ordination; but the
co-ordination is achieved without heavy subordination. The construction
is that of an accumulation of smaller complete syntactic units loosely co-
ordinated. A more extensive form of the construction is to be found in
much M.E. religious and didactic prose, as in this example from the *Book
of Vices and Virtues*:

> Men and wommen schulde haue þe eeren opene for to here
> gladliche þe goode wordes þat ben goode for helþe of þe soule
> and to þe goode wordes þat ben goode for þe lif, and schutte
> þe eeren to folie wordes and schrewed þat mowen do harme and
> no goode, wherfore þe wise seiþ in his boke, "Stoppe þin
> eeren wiþ þornes and herken not þe wikked tonge." þat is þe
> tonge of þe addre of helle þat þe euel spekere bereþ, þat
> enuenymeþ hym þat hereþ hem.   18

This sentence contains several relative clauses, is long and well-constructed; but there is little subordination to a topic clause. The sentence could end at any point past the end of the first relative clause (*þat ben goode for helþe of þe soule*), and still appear syntactically complete. At the same time, it is a syntactic procedure both confident and capable of rendering sustained structures. Syntax of this kind underlies much of the syntax of unrhymed M.E. alliterative verse, subjected to the further disciplines of long-line and half-line metrical units.

We may conclude that in the best alliterative poems at least, lack of periodicity in the Latinate sense is a matter of deliberate choice. There is considerable potential for sophistication in a syntax which proceeds by local formalisation, incrementation of larger patterns and frequent parallelism. In many respects the syntax of M.E. alliterative poetry is more flexible than that of the rhymed poetry which has done so much to define our syntactic expectations.

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Notes

1. See for example J. J. Anderson, ed., *Patience* (Manchester, 1969), note on 1.117, p. 56, where Anderson discusses the syntactic disparity between earlier punctuation of 11.81-5, favouring a two-sentence structure dividing at the end of 1.82, and his own, which terminates the first sentence at the end of 1.84. In preparing this account I have consulted the following manuscripts for texts of alliterative poems: British Library MS Cotton Nero A x (*Gawain; Cleanness; Patience*), BL MS Harley 2250 (*St. Erkenwald*); BL MS Additional 31042 (*Winner and Waster*), and Bodleian Library MS Douce 324 (*Awntyrs off Arthure*). I have referred to the following editions: *Cleanness*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz (1921-33; 2 vols. reprinted as 1, Cambridge, 1974); *Purity*, ed. R. J. Menner, Yale Studies in English 61 (New Haven, 1920); *Patience*, ed. J. J. Anderson (Manchester, 1969); *Patience*, ed. H. Bateson, 2nd ed. (Manchester, 1918); *Patience*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz (London, 1922); *St. Erkenwald*, ed. H. L. Savage, Yale Studies in English 72 (New Haven, 1926); *St. Erkenwald*, ed. Ruth Morse (Cambridge, 1975); *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. revised by Norman Davis (London, 1967); *Winner and Waster*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz (1930; rpt. Cambridge, 1974); *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*, ed. R. J. Gates (Philadelphia, 1969); *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, ed. R. F. Hanna III (Manchester, 1974).

2. See, for example, Ronald A. Waldron, "Oral-Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry", *Speculum* 32 (1957), 792-804, p. 800f., for this comment on the syntax of the *Morte Arthure* 11.26-48: "It is decidedly unliterary in appearance. The syntax sometimes has a cumulative character as if the poet is being led on irresistibly from line to line without regard to sentence pattern... How are we to regard the syntax of this passage? Having started with an adverbial clause of time in line 26 we do not reach anything which can be regarded as a main clause until line 48... It is impossible to punctuate according to our ideas of clause and sentence... Whatever these facts imply, they seem inconsonant with a process of careful repolishing such as we associate with the production of written literature."

3. See Cecily Clark, "*Sir Gawain*: Characterisation by Syntax", *EC* 16 (1966), 361-74; A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (London, 1964), pp. 39-42; R. Zimmermann, "Verbal Syntax and style in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *E Studies* 54 (1973), 533-43.

4. My primary reference works in giving an account of the syntax of M.E. alliterative verse were Tauno F. Mustanoja. *A Middle English Syntax*, I (Helsinki, 1960) and, to a lesser extent, H. Koziol, *Grundzüge der Syntax der mittelenglischen Stabreimdichtungen*, Wiener Beiträge zur englischen Philologie 58 (Vienna and Leipzig, 1932). I have also consulted W.

Havers, *Handbuch der Erklärenden Syntax: ein Versuch zur Erforschung der Bedingungen und Triebkräfte in Syntax und Stilistik* (Heidelberg, 1931), and F. Th. Visser, *An Historical Syntax of the English Language* (Leiden, 1963-73; 2nd ed., 1970-).

5. For the "absolute construction", see J. P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English* (1930-5; 2 vols. rpt. as 1, Hamden, Connecticut, 1968), II 394, and Larry D. Benson, "The Authorship of *St. Erkenwald*", *JEGP* 64 (1965), 393-405.

6. In this quotation, I follow the punctuation of Gollancz rather than that of Morse.

7. Not all formal alliterative verse denies any place to enjambement; it occurs not often but unmistakably in *Gawain*, mostly in the last long line introducing the bob. The boldest instances of enjambement occur in informal poems, especially in *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. M. Day and R. Steele, EETS OS 199 (1934); see lines 572-3 of the M fragment:
    Full woo for I ne wiste what was my best
    Reed – forto reste or rome more at large.

8. See Alarik Rynell, *Parataxis and Hypotaxis as a Criterion of Syntax and Style Especially in Old English Poetry* (Lund, 1952); and also S. O. Andrew, *Syntax and Style in Old English* (Cambridge, 1940); Claes Schaar, *Critical Studies in the Cynewulf Group* (Lund, 1949); Adelaide C. Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (Columbia, 1935).

9. Jan Simko, *Word-Order in the Winchester Manuscript and in William Caxton's Edition of Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur: a Comparison* (Halle, 1957), p. 5.

10. This is best demonstrated by Waldron, "Oral-Formulaic Technique"; see also R. F. Lawrence, "Formula and Rhythm in *The Wars of Alexander*", *English Studies* 51 (1970), 1-16. I do not believe, however, that rhythmical and syntactic formalisation need be associated with a theory of formulaic composition.

11. See A. N. Duggan, "Strophic Patterns in M.E. Alliterative Poetry", *Modern Philology* 74 (1977), 223-47, for a demonstration of strophic patterns in *The Wars of Alexander*; but see below, p. 615.

12. The text is that of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (London, 1957).

13. Cf. for example, *Destruction of Troy* 5406
    And welcomth þat worthy the weghes ychon;
Sir Gawain 136,
    þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster;
Sir Gawain 241,
    þerfore to answare watȝ arȝe mony aþel freke;
Sir Gawain 377,
    þen carppeȝ to Sir Gawan þe knyȝt in þe grene.

14. *Patience*, ed. Anderson, p. 68. Anderson, following Gollancz, regards lines 514-15 as an earlier draft cancelled by the poet, but there are insufficient grounds for this view, which is necessary only to retain a quatrain structure.

15. Samuel K. Workman, *Fifteenth Century Translation as an Influence on English Prose*, Princeton Studies in English 18 (Princeton, 1940). See also R. K. Stone, *Middle English Prose Style: Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich* (The Hague and Paris, 1970).

16. For a good discussion of Malory's syntax, see S. T. Knight, "Style and the Effects of Style in Malory's Arthuriad", *Parergon* 9 (August, 1974), 3-24.

17. *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. S. J. H. Herrtage, EETS ES 33 (1879). p. 19.

18. *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. Nelson Francis, EETS OS 217 (1942), p. 284.