

raggs, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-Herods Herod. Pray you avoid it.¹⁸

This famous speech lists many of the defining characteristics of the Herod role: the thrusting gestures (perhaps similar to the Chester Herod's sword-play) and the *robustious* or violent attitude, but more importantly for this essay, the whirling tempest of noise that 'split[s] the ears of the groundlings' and rips 'a passion to tatters, to very raggs'.

In line with such character traits, York's Herod bursts suddenly into the performance space demanding silence and obedience from the audience, and, like his fellow tyrants elsewhere in the cycle plays, threatens violence upon those who do not conform. Other scholars have noted that this initiates a particular type of interactive game between the tyrant and the audience, one in which the latter are cajoled into reacting and responding to the despotic figure on stage (more of which later).¹⁹ Alliterative verse is often associated with such figures and noted for its use in works exploring courtly bombast, political oppression and shifts in power, all of which are also topics addressed in most Herod pageants.²⁰ However, because of its rhythmic flexibility and relative lack of formal constraints (as compared with syllabic verse) it is also a highly versatile poetry and can be used to express a variety of emotions, themes and topics. And it is, as this essay will argue, the flexibility and malleability of alliterative verse that the playwright exploits in *Christ before Herod*.

The Sound of Tyranny

In contrast with syllabic verse, in alliterative verse the alliteration is structural and not simply decorative. The alliterative long line usually contains four stresses and is divided by a caesura into two 'verses', the a-verse and the b-verse, each given two stresses, or lifts. While syllables are vital for the overall effect, the number of unstressed syllables per line varies as can the pattern of their placement between the four lifts meaning that, although there are usually four stresses per line, their proximity to one another can vary significantly, creating vastly different stylistic effects. The standard alliterative pattern is usually cited as aa/ax, the typical arrangement in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with alliteration placed on both stressed syllables in the a-verse, but only the first in the b-verse. This also varies depending on what a particular poet wants to emphasise and

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the effect that he/she wants to create, with the force and power of the line, and its flexibility, coming from the relationship between stress and alliteration, which can both complement and compete with one another.²¹ As already mentioned, the alliterative long line can be moulded to suit an array of different moods and topics, and a comparison of its use in *Piers Plowman* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* neatly demonstrates this point. These patterns are generally associated with unrhymed alliterative verse and while much can be transferred to the rhymed stanzaic alliterative form (which includes *Christ before Herod*) there is an important difference to the alliterative pattern. Instead of the aa/ax arrangement, in rhymed stanzas the final stressed syllable also often alliterates to form an aa/aa pattern. For the greater part of his opening speech Herod adheres to the rhymed stanzaic pattern of aa/aa alliteration and only deviates from four stresses on three occasions: in a one-stress bob line and in two three-stress lines in which the caesura is also removed. The verse in this pageant is, nonetheless, extremely varied and it is to the complexities of metre to we must first turn to establish exactly what makes Herod's speech so 'tumultuous'.

Like most tyrants in the York Cycle, Herod opens his pageant with a demand for silence from the audience; he ascends his wagon and bellows 'Pes, ye brothellis and browlys in þis broydenesse inbrased' (1).²² The actor playing Herod would have been in competition with an array of sounds emanating from the city and the audience, a general cacophony of noise over which the performer needed to be heard. The initial interjection here would certainly have had a pragmatic effect, the simple, single syllable *Pes* offering a short, sharp order, calling attention to the player and the commencement of the performance. Such a sudden outburst would ensure that the actor would not be consumed by the noise of the city and the other pageants close by, making him prominent within the soundscape and so a central figure within the performance space itself.²³ It is therefore also likely that this initial monosyllabic eruption would have been experienced as an individual unit of speech and therefore not part of the metrical pattern that follows. The rest of this line along with line 2 establishes the underlying arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables against which the rest of Herod's speech will be measured; in other words, it establishes the rhythm that an audience can perhaps begin to anticipate. In both lines 1 and 2 the a-verse pattern runs *x/xx/x* ('ye brothellis and browlys'; 'And freykis þat are frendely'), that is two stressed syllables each flanked by one unstressed syllable and separated by a disyllabic dip.²⁴ In the b-verse there