

# ALPHABET POEMS: A BRIEF HISTORY

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As a collector of alphabet books, and sometime editor of a newsletter on that subject, I have had many opportunities to consider the history of the alphabet poem. Although alphabet poems may take a wide range of forms, most are generally divided into twenty-six parts (lines, couplets, stanzas...), one for each letter. (Non-English alphabets may have other than twenty-six letters, and English alphabet poems prior to the mid XIXth century did not distinguish between I and J, or U and V.) Typically, alphabet poems are acrostic poems in which the first letter of each line (or couplet, or stanza) spells out the alphabet (more generally, an acrostic poem hides a word or phrase in its first letters). There are also mesostic poems in which middle letters form the alphabet, but alphabetic telestics in which the alphabet is at line-end, appear to be quite rare. (I know of none; I challenge readers to create one that rhymes.) There are also other alphabet poems that do not conveniently fall into any of these categories, which I relegate to future discussions.

By and large, the alphabet poems written today are intended for children and are found in ABC books. Many are uninspired:

a is for apple ready to eat  
 b is for boots to put on your feet...  
 (Rod Campbell, *Little Learners Alphabet*, London 1988)

Creative authors have, however, produced some offbeat specimens:

A was an ape who stole some white tape,  
 and tied up his toes in four beautiful bows...  
 (Edward Lear, "Alphabet No. 3" in *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets*, London 1871)

Droll masterpieces of ingenuity are the gems of the genre:

...The Addis, a skink, can make lepers feel fine;  
 The Balisaur, badger, is nosed like a swine;  
 The Chil, or Indian kite, is a hawk;  
 The Dikkop's a curlew with dikkopy squawk...  
 (Willard R. Espy, "The Alphabet Circus where the Beasts All Sit and Rhyme", in *Words to Rhyme With, Facts on File* 1986)

Exceptionally complex examples abound, the most famous example being both an acrostic and a mesostic. Not only that, every word in each line begins with the same letter. Describing the Crimean War, it begins:

An Austrian army awfully arrayed  
 Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade...

Felt by some to have been written by C.C. Bombaugh, this alliterative tour de force was first published in England in the XIXth century, shortly after the events it describes. Reprinted in many versions, it is the subject of extensive discussion in Eric Partridge's very readable *Comic Alphabets*.

### Hebrew Biblical Alphabet Poetry

Generally speaking, there has not been much written on the history of alphabet poetry, but it is agreed that the earliest extant examples are those found in the Bible and related religious texts. Many of these texts are known to us in their non-alphabet English translations.

Hebrew alphabet poems are variously structured, but all are acrostic. The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters whose order has remained largely unchanged since antiquity. Most of the alphabet poems contain twenty-two verses or a multiple thereof.

In the best known example, Psalm 119, all eight lines of each stanza begin with the same letter, and each stanza introduces a new letter. There are at least seventeen examples of Hebrew alphabet poetry, of which fourteen are found in the Old Testament and three others are Dead Sea Scroll texts that did not enter the standard Biblical canon.

Just in the book of Lamentations, four of five chapters are alphabetic; not surprisingly, then, what scant literature there is on Biblical acrostic verse is therefore usually found in critical studies of this book. The Biblical alphabet poems were written at different times, but none apparently later than VI-Vth century BC. In some instances, erratic scribal transmission has resulted in omission or reordering of verses; this can be deduced from missing or incorrectly ordered letters.

Knowledge is scant regarding why the alphabetic poem was such a popular literary device in post-exilic Jewish literature. Several reasons have been suggested. Firstly, alphabetic texts are relatively easily committed to memory. Psalm 119, which is a lengthy description of Jewish law, renders a complex body of knowledge more accessible through its alphabetic structure. Secondly, just as we say in English "everything from A to Z", the use of an alphabetic structure may have implicitly symbolized completeness. Then too, there is the possibility of viewing these texts as early children's alphabets, although generally it is felt that the level of sophistication of the texts is too high to have been intended for children.

Looking for ways to convey the structure of these poems in translation, some scholars have produced alphabetic renditions of these poems in other languages. Ronald Knox, a man of remarkable literary and linguistic achievement, actually translated fourteen of the poems alphabetically (*The Holy Bible, Translated from the Latin Vulgate in the light of the Hebrew and Greek*, London 1955). His Lamentations 1:1-22

begins:

1:1 Alone she dwells...  
 1:2 Be sure she weeps...  
 1:3 Cruel the suffering...

Making use of the fact that there are only twenty-two Hebrew letters, Knox generally omitted difficult letters like Q,X,Y and Z in his translations; still the effort is remarkable. Other alphabetic translators of single poems are Theodor Gaster (part of the Ecclesiasticus poem in *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, 3rd ed. 1976) and Artur Weiser (Psalm 111 in *Die Psalmen*, Gottingen 1950).

### Latin Alphabetic Hymns

New life was given to the genre of alphabet poetry in the early centuries of the Christian era, which witnessed a flourishing of Latin alphabetic hymns, as well as other acrostic poetry. These works were no doubt influenced by the Biblical acrostics, as well as by late pre-Christian Greek alphabetic poetry, some examples of which still survive (I am aware of close to twenty alphabetic Latin hymns and three or four Greek ones).

On balance, dating of the Latin hymns is difficult, as most of the compositions predate the manuscripts in which they are preserved. Among the earlier datable examples are a hymn to St. Patrick by St. Sechnall, which can be dated from internal evidence to the Vth century, and one by St. Augustine (IVth century). The St. Patrick hymn comprises eight-line stanzas, the first three of which begin:

Audite omnes amantes...  
 Beata Christi custodit...  
 Constans in Dei timore...

Perforce Latin hymns are generally solemn in nature, but the playfulness of the alphabetic structure intrudes slightly in these works. We see altered spellings to provide words for the more difficult letters ("Karus" for "carus") and Greek and even Hebrew phrases are sometimes borrowed by the poet desperate for an X- or Z-word. Sometimes extensive alliteration is employed as well, reinforcing the alphabetic structure of the hymn.

### Rune Poems

Quaint and curious in nature is the "Old English Rune Poem" (VIII-IXth century, now destroyed but fortunately transcribed in 1705) by an unknown author. This work, the earliest known English-language alphabet poem of any kind, teaches, verse by verse, the letters of the Runic alphabet and their symbolism. By the time this poem was composed, the use of runes was quite restricted, and the poem itself, except for the first letter of each line, is written in the Roman alphabet.

Rune poems are also found in Old Icelandic (earliest manuscript VIIth

century), and Old Norse (earliest manuscript XIIth century, now destroyed). In *The Old English 'Rune Poem': A Critical Edition* (Toronto 1981), Maureen Halsall posits that the Rune Poem authors were directly influenced by the Latin acrostic hymns.

### Vernacular Alphabet Poems

Sometime before the advent of the printing press, as authors were making the transition from Latin to their native European languages, it was inevitable that someone should think to write alphabet poems in English, French and other vernaculars. The earliest English alphabet poems (Roman, rather than Runic) date from no later than the XIVth century, and the earliest one of known authorship is by Geoffrey Chaucer. His poem, which is usually untitled or simply called "An ABC", is a prayer to the Virgin Mary, the first three verses of which begin:

Almighty and al merciabie queene...  
 Bountee so fix hath in thin herte his tente...  
 Comfort is noon but in yow, ladi deere...

The Chaucer alphabet is thought to have been written in 1369; if so, it is his earliest surviving composition. But it is not original; it is a translation of a popular French poem written about 1330 by Guillaume de Deguilleville. A beautiful illuminated copy of the French poem in the Morgan library (M 272) may be the earliest illustrated alphabet poem in this country.

### Modern Early Alphabet Poetry

Until the XVIIIth century, most books for children were on religious themes, and it is natural that when alphabet poetry begins to figure widely in children's literature, religious themes continue to dominate (quite a few are still being published, but they are far outnumbered by secular ones). Perhaps the most well known of these poems begins:

|                |                   |
|----------------|-------------------|
| In Adam's Fall | Thy Life to Mend  |
| We sinned all. | This Book attend. |

Versions of this poem abound, usually accompanied by tiny woodcut illustrations, in many XVIIIth century American primers. Edward Gorey, in *The Eclectic Abecedarium*, parodies both the illustrations and the terse epigrammatic flavor of this poem. His I- and J-verses read:

|                   |                   |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Be loath to drink | Don't try to cram |
| Indian Ink.       | The dog with Jam. |

With the advent of the industrial age, children's literature enters a more secular period, and we start to see alphabet poetry about animals, railroads, professions, and a whole host of other topics.

XIX and XXth century alphabet poetry exhibits a wide variety of styles. Edward Lear wrote a round dozen droll alphabets, pioneering in the field of alphabetic silliness. Dr. Seuss took this one step further

in *On Beyond Zebra*, an entire alphabetic poem based on an invented alphabet.

Younger authors have in recent decades changed the nature of poetry, and our definition of it has become more inclusive. Varieties of alphabet poetry have consequently increased. There are poems (generally not written for children) whose alphabetic structure is implied, rather than overt, such as Lily R. Markiewicz' *The Price of Words*, and there are alphabet poems where the order of letters is subverted for effect, such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Draft X: Letters* (where the alphabet appears in qwerty keyboard order). There are also poems in which the alphabet plays a thematic, but not structural role, such as *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault, and *A Visit from St. Alphabet by Word Ways'* own David Morice.

Zealous recreational linguists are encouraged to find a hidden alphabet in this article.

### **An International Exposition of Wordplay**

For all the efforts of purists like Johnson to defend it, the language is incomparably flexible. It is like molten glass: you can stretch it, shape it, chop it, misspell, mispronounce or misinflect it, cruelly misplace its elements and somehow you still end with English. It's a fun tongue.

The British Council is about to send an exhibition, under the title of "Wordplay", on just that theme for four years around Eastern Europe. It is backed by *The Economist*--what is the Czech for "blowing your own trumpet"?--and fun it is, full of puns and palindromes, dialects, jargon, simplicity and pomp, cliches, metaphors, oddities, inventions (Bernard Shaw's famous spelling of "fish"--ghoti, with gh as in cough, o as in women and tias in -tion--is only just beyond the bounds of the possible). No one, maybe, will learn to write a better computer manual from this exhibition; anyone who does not profit from it, be he as English as Johnson, must be a dull stick. Or, if you prefer newspeak, a lamebrain.

--The Economist, 23 Oct 1993