

Call for Papers

New Perspectives on Alliteration in Poetry and Cultural History

Conference at the University of East Anglia (UEA) and Online

1 September 2025

Confirmed plenary speakers: Professor Joseph Phelan (De Montfort), Professor Chris Jones (Utah).

Alliteration is one of the first poetic techniques which students learn to identify: a prominent feature of nursery rhymes, nonsense verse and tongue-twisters. As easy to follow as ABC, it links rhythm to letters and provides a gentle introduction to the workings of poetic sound. If this makes alliteration approachable and useful, it might also explain why, in the words of John Lennard, alliteration ‘is oddly derided or thought childish’ in today’s literary criticism. As the reception of poets like G. M. Hopkins and Mathilde Blind shows, readers often disagree whether (and when) alliterating is fun or affected, virtuosic or juvenile, motivated or meaningless. Such uncertainties leave clues as to alliteration’s complex origins and varied agency in cultural history.

Much new research in poetics shows how alliterative practices took shape in response to historical forces and fixations: growing knowledge of the English-language past; changing ideals in elocution and rhetoric; shifting notions of what is native and foreign, demotic and elevated, masculine and feminine. The role of alliteration in Old English poetry, and alliterative ‘revivals’ from the Middle Ages to the present day, make rich themes in today’s scholarship. Research increasingly accounts for the way these revivals have sprung from nationalist movements and nativist ideologies. But alliteration in English has drawn inspiration from other sources as well, revealing different facets in its social and cultural make-up: Ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew; art music and folksong; symbolist and surrealist poetry; vanishing dialects and emerging creoles. By mobilising doubt about what is innovative and archaic, familiar and foreign, alliteration can prompt fresh questions about how critics analyse, historicise and translate poetic language.

This is the first major event focused on alliteration since The Folklore Society’s conference ‘Alliteration in Culture’ in 2007. Presenting an opportunity to take stock of poetics research since then, it aims to expand discussions about alliteration by welcoming interdisciplinary and multilingual perspectives alongside contributions centred upon anglophone literary and cultural history. We invite papers of up to **20 minutes** in English. Suggested topics include:

- Revivals and imitations of Old English poetry to the present day
- Computational and statistical approaches to individual poets and periods
- Questions of definition
- Alliteration in literary translation
- Problems of gender in alliterative history and scholarship
- Voices, vernaculars and creoles
- Primitivism, nationalism and nativism
- Nursery rhymes, nonsense verse and tongue twisters
- Contemporary and emerging alliterative practices
- Alliteration's role in political movements and oratory
- Librettos, lyrics and musical compositions
- Elocution and dysfluency
- Parody, pastiche, polemic and satire
- Comparative perspectives on alliteration in other literatures

Abstracts of up to 250 words, with a short biographical note, should be submitted as a word file (.doc, .docx) to Dr Timothy Anderson at alliteration.conf@uea.ac.uk. The extended deadline for abstracts is **30 June 2025**. Contributions from graduate students are welcome.

For further information and updates, see [the conference website](#).

This event is generously funded by the British Academy and the University of East Anglia via Dr Timothy Anderson's British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship project "'Here Once Did Sound Sweet Words': Alliterative Innovation in Poetry and Poetics of the Long Nineteenth Century'.

