

Metrical Constraints of King Arthur's *Round Table*
in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*

Yasuyo Moriya

The excessive repetition of the same sounds makes *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* (*AMA*) unique among the alliterative poems of the fourteenth century. Sound repetition, particularly the repetition of /r/ in the *AMA*, is illuminating because it reveals the special treatment of the phrase *the round table* within the verse line. The present paper examines /r/ in the alliteration of the *AMA* and analyzes the lines that contain *the round table* in order to prove that the poet requires this phrase to receive full metrical significance. The fixed location of *the round table* in the second half-line of the *AMA* is due to the metrical constraints which impose overwhelming alliteration of the /r/ sound. Through various observations of /r/, the paper reveals that the *AMA* poet uses excessive repetition of the same sound more than required by alliterative meter, expanding the repetition of the same sound beyond the verse line. Yet he is extremely inflexible regarding the alliteration of a line that contains *the round table* even though he could have chosen a different word order or different alliteration sounds as seen in other ME works on King Arthur.

Intricate sound repetition plays an important role in creating unity not only within the line but also in a group of consecutive lines in the *AMA*. Through the examination of /r/ in alliteration and the analysis of the lines that contain *the round table* it becomes clear that the poet always requires the particular phrase, *the round table*, to receive full metrical stress. This paper compares *the round table* in the *AMA* with *the round table* in other ME alliterative works about King Arthur such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*), *The Stanzaic Morte Arthur* (*SMA*), *Merlin*, and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. While the other works allow the adjective *round* and the noun *table* to appear in the reversed order, the *AMA* never does so. The other texts are flexible in the selection of the noun that precedes *the round table* while the *AMA* always chooses the noun that alliterates on /r/. After considering if this inflexibility can be interpreted as a formulaic

expression, the paper postulates the metrical framework used for the line containing *the round table*.

The base rule of alliterative meter is to alliterate a certain number of stressed syllables within the verse line. In many cases the number is three out of four per line, but the number may also be more or less. The verse line may be in five-beat meter, of which three or four beats commonly alliterate. Repetition of the same sound in stressed syllables is rare in ordinary speech, and thus offers special aural effects.¹ The *AMA* extends this alliterative device beyond one single line, employing the same sound over several consecutive lines. This phenomenon may be realized in various sounds and numbers of lines as seen in the following passage:²

- 362 And raas it from his riche men and ryfe it in sondyre, /r/
 363 Bot he be redily reschowede with riotous knyghtez. /r/
 364 sall enforse owe in fle felde with fresche men of armes, /f/
 365 Fyfty thosande folke apon faire stedys, /f/
 366 On thi foo men to foonnde there the faire thynkes, /f/
 367 In Fraunce or in Friselande, feghte when fle lykes. /f/
 368 'By Oure Lorde' quod sir Launcelott 'now lyghtys myn herte— /l/
 369 I loue Gode of flis lone flis lordes has avowede! /l/
 370 Now may lesse men haue leue to say whatt them lykes /l/
 371 And hafe no lettyng be lawe. Bot lystynny flise wordez: /l/

The first two lines alliterate on the same /r/. Starting from line 364, identical alliteration in four consecutive lines appear twice in a row. The same alliteration sound in two and four lines is frequent in the *AMA*, but identical alliteration over more than six lines is often observed. The two passages below exemplify extreme cases of identical alliteration in six and ten consecutive lines respectively:³

- 2790 Bot thane a renke, sir Richere of fle Rounde Table, /r/
 2791 One a ryall stede rydes hym a aynes; /r/
 2792 Thorowe a rownnde rede schelde he ruschede hym sone, /r/
 2793 That the rosselde spere to his herte rynnnes. /r/
 2794 The renke relys abowte and rusches to fle erthe, /r/
 2795 Roris full ruydlye, bot rade he no more. /r/
- 3509 'Me awghte to knowe fle kynge; he es my kydde lorde, /k/
 3510 And I, calde in his courte a knyghte of his chambire. /k/
 3511 Sir Craddoke was I callide in his courte riche, /k/

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- 3512 Keparē of Karlyon vndir the kynge selfen. /k/
3513 Nowe am I cachede owtt of kyth with kare at my herte, /k/
3514 And that castell es cawghte with vncowthe ledys! /k/
3515 Than the comliche kynge kaughte hym in armes, /k/
3516 Keste of his ketill-hatte and kyssede hym full sone, /k/
3517 Saide 'Welcom, sir Craddoke, so Criste mott me help /k/
3518 Dere cosyng of kynde, thow coldis myn herte— /k/

The overwhelming repetition of the same sound in stressed syllables inevitably creates distinct unity among adjacent lines. This method of alliterating several consecutive lines on identical sounds is called "grouped alliteration,"⁴ "identical alliteration,"⁵ or "consecutive alliteration,"⁶ and seems to be used quite intentionally in the *AMA*. About three-quarters, 75.2%, of the lines of the *AMA* are linked with their immediate neighbors by the same sound.⁷

The intense network of identical alliteration produces certain metrical peculiarities other than excessive sound repetition. For instance, alliteration in certain lines may be weak since the surrounding lines sustain the alliteration. Lines 2791 and 2793 quoted above contain only two alliterating beats. Since alliteration often appears in the first three stressed syllables, these lines may look deviating due to their alliteration patterns of [axax] and [axxa] respectively. Yet other members of the identical group provide enough information about alliteration for these metrically weak lines to remain alliterative. The absence of rigid alliteration causes deliberate metrical blurring, but the tremendous sound repetition in a group of lines does not allow these lines with weak alliteration to become metrically insignificant. As Hamel assumes, this may help prevent monotony if such an interpretation justifies the lack of regular alliteration in the overwhelmingly repetitious rhythm.⁸

The alliteration on /r/ in the *AMA* illuminates certain features peculiar to this poem. Identical alliteration on /r/ appears in 258 lines of the *AMA*: seventy-five times in two lines, five times in three lines, fourteen times in four lines, once in five lines, four times in six lines, and once in eight lines. Alliteration on /r/ in a single line that does not remain in identical alliteration with adjacent lines is observed in seventy-one lines, which makes the total number alliterating on /r/ 329 (7.6% of the entire lines of the *AMA*). The maximum number of lines for the identical alliteration on /r/ is eight, which is shown below:

- 1523 Thare myghte men see Romayne rewfully wondyde, /r/
 1524 Ouerredyn with renkes of the Round Table; /r/
 1525 In fle raike of fle furthe they ritten fleire brenys, /r/
 1526 fiat rane all on reede blode redylle all ouer. /r/
 1527 They raughte in fle rereuarde full ryotus knyghtez, /r/
 1528 For raunsone of rede golde and reall stedys, /r/
 1529 Radly relayes and restez theire horsez; /r/
 1530 In rowtte to fle ryche kyng they rade al at onez. /r/

The sound /r/ is not most frequently used in identical alliteration. The groups of the /s/ sound, the /k/ sound, and the /f/ sound are more frequent than /r/. However, /s/, /k/, and /f/ may take a form of different consonant clusters even though the same sound initiates them. For instance, alliteration in /s/ is realized in fourteen variants: *s*, *sc*, *sch*, *schr*, *sh*, *sk*, *sl*, *sm*, *sn*, *sp*, *spr*, *st*, *str*, and *sw*. The total number of 329 lines that alliterate on the consonant /r/, which cannot initiate any cluster, suggests how conspicuous its repetition is.

Though it does not initiate any consonant clusters, the sound /r/ acts in a distinct way in the English language. It cannot be the initial sound of any consonant cluster but can be a second or third constituent of different consonant clusters. In other words, /r/ may appear in different consonant clusters as a final constituent. For instance, /r/ in the following lines recurs not as the word-initial sound but as a second or third constituent of a consonant cluster:

- 786 Thane the *dragon* on *dreghe dressede* hym a aynez, /dr/
 1141 *Wrothely* flai *wrythyn* and *wrystill* togederz, /wr/
 1230 One a *strenghe* by a *streme* in flas *straytt* landez. /str/
 2844 *Prike* home to theire *prynce* and theire *pray* leue, /pr/

In these lines the recurrence of the same consonant cluster, /dr/, /wr/, /str/, and /pr/, creates special rhythm. Quite a few consonant clusters include /r/: *br*, *cr*, *dr*, *fr*, *gr*, *kr*, *pr*, *schr*, *spr*, *str*, *thr*, *tr*, and *wr*. These consonant clusters in alliteration generate a different web of /r/ when combined with the alliteration of /r/ itself. For example, /r/ constantly appears in the stressed syllables of the following two passages. To show the repetition, /r/ in stressed syllables is shown in bold face:

- 3212 We will by fle *Crosse*-dayes *encroche* fleis londez /k/
 3213 And at fle *Crystynmesse* daye be *crowned* theraftyre; /k/

- 3214 *Ryngne* in my *ryalltés* and holde my *Rownde Table* /r/
 3215 Withe the *rentes of Rome*, as me beste lykes. /r/
 3216 Syne *graythe* ouer fle *Grette* See with gud men of armes /g/
 3217 To *reuenge* the *Renke* that on the *Rode dyede*. /r/
 3218 Thane this comlyche *kyng*e, as *cronycles* tellys, /k/
 3219 *Bownnys* *brathely* to *bede* with a *blythe* herte; /b/

 3753 Thus thas *renkes* in *rewthe* *rittis* theire *brenyes* /r/
 3754 And *rechis* of fle *richeste* *vnreken* dynttis, /r/
 3755 Thare they *thronge* in the *thikke* and *thristis* to fle *erthe*— th
 3756 Of the *thraeste* men *thre* hundrethe at ones! th
 3757 Bot sir *Gawayne* for *grefe* myghte noghte agayne-stande; /g/
 3758 *Vmbegrippys* a spere and to a gome *rynnys* /g/
 3759 fiat bare of *gowles* full gaye with *gowtes* of *syluere*; /g/
 3760 He *gyrdes* hym in at fle *gorge* with his *grym* launce, /g/
 3761 fiat fle *grownden* *glayfe* *graythes* in *sondyre*; /g/
 3762 With flat *boystous* *brayde* he *bownes* hym to dye: /b/

Identical alliteration unites lines 3212 and 3213 by the identical /kr/ sound and lines 3214 and 3215 by /r/. The subsequent four lines do not remain in identical alliteration, but /r/ continuously echoes in them. In the second passage starting from line 3753, /r/ is heard constantly even though these lines belong to different groups of identical alliteration. The sound /r/ thus plays two roles in alliterative meter: to appear as an alliterating word-initial sound and to be part of an alliterating sound preceded by other sounds.⁹

This repetition of /r/ is much more reinforced if we agree with Vantuono who assumes that the ME /r/ was “strongly trilled.”¹⁰ The language was still rhotic when alliterative verse became popular in the fourteenth century, so /r/ was never dropped as is done in modern varieties. Chaucer must have had a good ear to use the phrase *rum, ram, ruf* in the *Canterbury Tales* to cynically describe alliterative meter. The *AMA* poet intended to expand the alliterative device beyond the single line by means of identical alliteration. Furthermore, he was able to create a new sound network with /r/ by fully utilizing the multiple roles that the sound /r/ can play in different consonant clusters.

Examining the behavior of /r/ in the alliteration of the *AMA*, one phenomenon caught my attention. Namely, the phrase *the round table* appears only in the second half-line, and the line with *the round table* always alliterates on /r/. The round table plays an important

role in the Arthurian legends, and a considerable amount of research has been made on its source, meaning and symbolic significance.¹¹ But the location of *the round table* in alliterative meter has not received much attention. The *AMA* contains forty-eight occasions of the whole phrase *the round table* and five occasions of the single word *table*. The following lines exemplify how the phrase appears:

- 17 Off the ryeall renkys of the Rownde Table,
 726 Rewlys before fle ryche of the Rounde Table,
 2641 And rollede the richeste of all fle Rounde Table.

The round table always occupies the entire second half-line, *round* and *table* fulfilling the first and second stressed positions of the second half-line respectively. This can be explained by the metrical make-up of the phrase itself. Since the adjective and the noun do not alliterate with each other, the alliteration inevitably deviates if it appears in other positions. Having the phrase in the middle means that the adjective will not alliterate if the line alliterates on /t/, or that the noun does not alliterate if the line alliterates on /r/. Neither case is favorable to the poet though it is indeed possible for him to place an unalliterating beat in the positions other than the line-final position as seen, for instance, in lines 3212 to 3215 above. He seems to have consciously avoided placing *the round table* in the line-initial or line-medial position. Indeed, there is no line in the *AMA* that contains *the round table* and alliterates on /t/. It seems that *the round table* is such a fixed phrase that the poet does not want the word *round*, whenever it accompanies *table*, to be unalliterating and thus to become metrically insignificant.

If *the round table* occupies the second half-line or the third and final stressed positions in the four-beat meter, the first and second positions must alliterate on /r/ in order for the line to achieve the common pattern of alliteration. That is what actually happens, and those words that start with /r/ tend to be a certain group of /r/ words. The most frequent are *reall* (royal), *renk(e)* (man), and *ryche* (powerful). The following lines are similar in their lexical structures as well as in their metrical structures. The initial sounds of all the metrical beats are given between brackets in order to show the repetition of /r/:

- 17 Off the ryeall renkys of the Rownde Table, [r-r-r-t]
 719 Wyth a reall rowte of fle Rounde Table [r-r-r-t]

- 2902 And thane the ryalle renkkes of fle Rownde Table [r-r-r-t]
 4072 Than the royall roy of fle Rownde Table [r-r-r-t]

These lines indicate that the *AMA* poet associates *the round table* with a special connotation of nobility which starts with /r/.

Lines that remain in identical alliteration and contain *the round table* also tend to form alliteration on /r/ with words signifying nobility and knighthood. The following passages that contain *the round table* are in identical alliteration of /r/ in two, three, four, five, six, and eight lines respectively. The alliteration pattern is shown for the lines that contain *the round table*:

- 3939 The riche kynge ransakes with rewthe at his herte
 3940 And vp rypes the renkes of alle fle Rownde Tabyll: [r-r-r-t]
- 1882 Thane relyez fle renkez of fle Rownde Table [r-r-r-t]
 1883 For to ryotte fle wode fler fle duke restez;
 1884 Ransakes the ryndez all, raughte vp their feres
- 2918 Reuertede it redily and away rydys
 2919 To fle ryall rowte of fle Rownde Table; [r-r-r-t]
 2920 And heyly his retenuz raykes hym aftyre,
 2921 For they his reson had rede on his schelde ryche.
- 3892 When flat renayede renke remembirde hym seluen
 3893 Of [fle]reuerence and ryotes of fle Rownde Table, [r-r-r-t]
 3894 He remyd and repent hym of all his rewthe werkes:
 3895 Rode away with his rowte, ristys he no lengere,
 3896 For rade of oure riche kynge, ryve flat he scholde.
- 1665 The araye and fle ryalltez of fle Rownde Table [r-r-r-t]
 1666 Es wyth rankour rehersed in rewmes full many,
 1667 Of oure renttez of Rome syche reuell he haldys;
 1668 He sall ife resoun full rathe, if vs reghte happen,
 1669 That many sall repente that in his rowtte rydez,
 1670 For the reklesse roy so rewlez hym selfen.'
- 1523 Thare myghte men see Romaynez rewfully wondyde,
 1524 Ouerredyn with renkes of the Round Table; [r-r-r-t]
 1525 In fle raike of fle furthe they ritten fleire brenys,
 1526 fiat rane all on reede blode redylve all ouer.

- 1527 They raughte in the rerewarde full ryotus knyghtez,
 1528 For raunsone of rede golde and reall stedys,
 1529 Radly relayes and restez theire horsez;
 1530 In rowtte to fle ryche kynge they rade al at onez.

The round table appears in the [r-r-r-t] alliteration pattern in all of the examples. In other words, the alliteration pattern of *the round table* is strictly limited; it always has to alliterate with words that start with /r/. Surprisingly enough, all forty-eight lines containing *the round table* in their second half show this alliteration pattern even though slight deviations may be possible as we will see later.

The neighboring lines that remain in identical alliteration with the line containing *the round table* tend to contain words of nobility and knighthood as seen in the following list. Spelling variations are ignored:

araye, areste, ouerredyn, reall, rebell, reches, redily, redy,
 regne, rehetez, rekeneste, rekkynnye, releuis, renke, re-
 noune, renownde, renttes, reschewe, retenuz, reuerence,
 rewlys, Richere, rollede, Romaynes, Rome, Roone,
 rowte, roy, ryche, ryde, ryghte, ryotte, rype, ryuere

The words that appear in lines that remain in identical alliteration with the line containing *the round table* are *renke* (man), *renoune* (reputation), *reuerence* (deference), *roy* (king), *riche* (powerful), and *realle* (splendid). Especially frequent are *renke* (16 times), *riche* (14 times), and *reale* (10 times). *The round table* is immediately associated with words in the line that signify nobility. Furthermore, it is surrounded in the neighboring lines by words that start with /r/ signifying knighthood again. About seventy-three percent of the lines containing *the round table* remain in consecutive alliteration with the adjacent lines. Since nobility and knighthood is the topic in the context in which *the round table* appears, the fixed phrase tends to appear more frequently when the poet describes warriors and conquests. The noun preceding *the round table* often denotes warriors; adding the phrase, *of the round table*, could be redundant.

Certain scholars have argued that the phrases such as *the ryealle renkys of the Rownnde Table* (line 17) or *the ryche of the Rounde Table* (line 726) are formulae to describe the knights around King Arthur's table.¹² Since the word order is always *round plus table* in

the second half-line, it may be asserted that the phrase is a formula.¹³ If we define a formula to be any fixed phrase, *the round table* may be one of the typical formulae in the *AMA*. However, the formula is supposed to be used in a more complex manner. As claimed by Krishna, "repetition alone does not make a phrase a formula."¹⁴ Lines containing *the round table* can be classified into the following three patterns:

Pattern 1: NOUN + of + *the round table*

1-a: NOUN [+man] + of + *the round table*

147	Off fle richeste renkys of fle Rounde Table;	[r-r-r-t]
719	Wyth a reall rowte of fle Rounde Table	[r-r-r-t]
1429	Arestede of the richeste of fle Rounde Table,	[r-r-r-t]
1994	With renkkes renownnd of fle Rounde Table,	[r-r-r-t]
4072	Than the royall roy of fle Rownde Table	[r-r-r-t]
3571	With renttes and reches of the Rownde Table;	[r-r-r-t]

There are thirty-five occasions that fit this pattern. In other words, the most common syntactic structure for the phrase containing *the round table* is that a noun signifying noble men precedes it. Furthermore, these nouns that precede *the round table* almost always start with /r/.

1-b: NOUN [-man] + of + *the round table*

1665	The araye and fle ryalltez of fle Rounde Table	[r-r-r-t]
3893	Of fle reuerence and ryotes of fle Rownde Table,	[r-r-r-t]

This pattern is similar to the first one, but the noun preceding *the round table* does not denote human beings. An interesting deviation is observed in the following example that is written in this pattern. The collocation of an adjective and a noun is underlined:

173 Richely on fle ryghte hannde at the Rounde Table,

Realizing two metrical beats in the underlined phrase will result in an alliteration pattern that has five beats, two of which do not alliterate. It is quite possible for an adjective phrase in alliterative meter to have only one metrical stress if the adjective is short and does not convey extremely important information. The following lines, for example, contain an adjective or a noun that may not receive full metrical stress. In other words, two readings are possible depending

on whether full metrical stress in both the adjective and the noun is desirable:

- 214-a Bot fle bryght gólde for bréthe sulde bríste al to péces, [aaax]
 214-b Bot fle bryght gólde for bréthe sulde bríste al to péces, [axaax]
 185-a Grett swánnes full swythe in silueryn chárgeours, [aaax]
 185-b Grétt swánnes full swythe in silueryn chárgeours, [xaaax]

Both readings are possible, but reading *a* may be preferred for both of the lines for the sake of regular alliteration. In short, the alliterating constituent of a noun phrase is more likely to be realized as a metrical beat than the unalliterating constituent.¹⁵ As for line 173, the following reading that results in the rigid [r-r-r-t] pattern may be preferred since it is the most common metrical pattern for the line with the round table:

173 Ríchely on fle ryghte hannde at the Róunde Tábte,

Pattern 2: VERB + *the round table*

- 53 Then rystede that ryall and helde fle Rounde Tabyll,
 74 Thus on ryall araye he helde his Rounde Table
 424 Be fle ryuere of Roone halde my Rounde Table,
 3214 Rygne in my ryalltes and holde my Rownde Table
 4005 Ne rengne in my royaltez ne halde my Rownde Table

It is interesting that all the lines in which a verb precedes *the round table* contain the same verb *hold*, yet alliterate on /r/.

Pattern 3: PREP + *the round table*

- 93 fiat thow bee redy at Rome with all thi Rounde Table,
 2402 The renke rebell has bene vnto my Rownde Table,

There are a few occasions in which no particular noun precedes *the round table*.

Scholars such as Finlayson, Johnson, Krishna, and Waldron assert that the stock of formulas supports the idea of oral composition in alliterative verse.¹⁶ Johnson considers the structure of “FUNCTION-WORD ADJECTIVE knight” as a formula in which the adjective varies according to the alliteration requirement. He even suggests that the structure of FUNCTION-WORD ADJECTIVE NOUN in general can be a syntactic formula in the *AMA*.

Yet applying the idea of formulaic composition to the *AMA* must be done with caution.¹⁷ Ritzke-Rutherford uses the term *cluster* instead of the stricter *formula* in order to denote a group of words that is regularly employed to express a given essential idea. Whatever term is used, the extensive and frequent repetition of certain set phrases often marks the central motifs of the *AMA* in a special poetic sense. Investigating the metrical behavior of set phrases to describe warfare, fate, and knighthood may suggest a new interpretation of formulae in alliterative verse. Here, we may at least assert that *the round table* remains in a special metrical constraint, namely the strict [r-r-r-t] pattern.

Ritzke-Rutherford's examples of formula show an interesting point about set phrases in the *AMA*. She uses the following lines to explain that the word order may vary within a formula:

- 1399 Bot thare *chasez* on oure men *cheuallrous knyghtez*,
 1551 And for fle *cheefe chauncelere*, fle *cheualere noble*,
 2990 *Chases* and *choppes* down *cheftaynes noble*,

An alliterating word, whether it is an adjective or a noun, always occupies the first stressed position of the second half-line in these lines. The position of the adjective that is subordinate to a noun is flexible here; an adjective may precede the noun or follow it. The poet could have switched the word order and written *knyghtez chevallrous* in line 1399, *the noble chevalere* in line 1551, and *noble cheftaynes* in line 2990. The reason for not using these orders is metrical. In *The Stanzaic Morte Arthur (SMA)* this does happen for *the round table*.¹⁸

9 The knightis of the table Round,

The *SMA* is not an alliterative poem but is written in the eight-syllable line with end rhyme in the eight-line stanza. The word *round* in line 9 of the *SMA* rhymes with *found* in line 11, *bound* in line 13, and *sound* in line 15.¹⁹ In such a particular metrical context the poet of the *SMA* did not want to write *the Round table* for the sake of end rhyme. The same poet uses the order of *Round table* in line 1049 because in this particular case the line needs to rhyme with *stable* in line 1051, *profitable* in line 1053, and *fable* in line 1055.

The *AMA* poet knew that he could choose either the adjective form or a noun form of chivalry so that the alliterating syllable al-

ways occupied the first stressed position of the second half-line. Yet he did not want to reverse the order of the two words in the case of *the round table* to *the table round* as his contemporaries like the *SMA* poet and others whom we will observe later did. He did so, however, in the case of *cheualere noble* or *cheftaynes noble*.

If words other than *round* accompanied *table*, alliteration could occur in words that start with /t/ instead of /r/. This is not observed in the *AMA*, however. There are five occasions in the *AMA* in which the word *table* is not accompanied by the adjective *round*:

- | | | |
|------|---|------------|
| 1301 | Reght as fleȝ hade weschen and went to fle <u>table</u> , | [r-w-w-t] |
| 1330 | Ne ware it for reuerence of my ryche <u>table</u> , ²⁰ | [r-r-r-t] |
| 3192 | They tryne vnto a tente whare <u>tables</u> whare raysede. | [tr-t-t-r] |
| 3198 | Rehetez the Romaynes at his riche <u>table</u> , | [r-r-r-t] |
| 3201 | Reuerences the Romayns in his riche <u>table</u> . | [r-r-r-t] |

Three out of the five lines have *riche* in front of *table*. Here again the alliteration occurs on /r/, forming the same alliteration pattern [r-r-r-t] as those of lines that contain *the round table*. In other words, King Arthur's table in the *AMA* is almost always accompanied by an adjective that starts with /r/. *The round table* must occupy the entire second half-line, and the line must alliterate on /r/.

The occurrences of *the round table* in *SGGK*, another major poem about King Arthur, are far fewer. Though *SGGK* consists of 2530 lines, only six lines contain *the round table* and another six contain *table* without *round*. The following lines are the ones that contain *the round table*:²¹

- | | | |
|------|--|-----|
| 39 | Rekenly of fle <u>Rounde Table</u> alle flo rich brefler— | /r/ |
| 313 | Now is fle reuel and fle renoun of fle <u>Rounde Table</u> | /r/ |
| 538 | With much reuel and ryche of fle <u>Rounde Table</u> . | /r/ |
| 905 | fiat is fle ryche ryal kyng of fle <u>Rounde Table</u> , | /r/ |
| 2458 | fiat rennes of fle grete renoun of fle <u>Rounde Table</u> ; | /r/ |
| 2519 | For flat watz acorded fle renoun of fle <u>Rounde Table</u> | /r/ |

The *SGGK* poet uses *the round table* in a similar way to the *AMA* poet, placing it in the second half-line and associating it with words of nobility. Yet line 39 places *the round table* in the middle. Three ways of reading in different alliteration patterns are possible as shown in the following scansion:

- 39-a Rékenly of fle Róunde Table alle flo rích bréfler— [aaax]
 39-b Rékenly of fle Róunde Táble alle flo rích bréfler— [axax]
 39-c Rékenly of fle Róunde Táble alle flo rích bréfler— [aaxax]

The first reading is the one that conforms to regular alliteration, not realizing metrical stress in the word *table*. The second reading treats *round* as being metrically subordinated to the noun it modifies, but the resulting alliteration is not a regular one. Reading *c* realizes metrical beats in all the syllables that can receive stress, thus producing a line that has five stressed syllables.²² In the first two readings, *round table* does not receive full metrical stress in both of its constituents, which is not favorable to the *AMA* poet.

One common phenomenon found in both the *AMA* and *SGGK* is that both of the poets never fail to alliterate the line with *the round table* on /r/. This restriction is solely due to the alliteration purpose since the most common noun that denotes the noble men of the round table in the Arthurian legends is *knyghtes*. The phrase, *knyghtes of the round table*, is extremely common in a prose romance, *Merlin*, and in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. The following are a few examples from *Merlin* in which *knyghtes* precedes *the round table*.²³

This is the trouth, that the knyghtes of *the rounde table*, that was stablissed and founded in the tyme of Vterpendragon, youre fader, on whos soule god haue mercy, . . . (Chapter 7)

. . . that thei were not assailed of somme maner peple, and the kynge Ban and the kynge Bohors ledde the kynge Arthur and sir Gawein and the knyghtes of *the rounde table*, and the xl knyghtes that ye haue herde named, and the newe knyghtes in to the castell of Trebes . . . (Chapter 23)

. . . and the fray of the people of kynge Rion, and of the peple of kynge Arthur; and ther dide Gawein, and Ewein, and Segramor, and Gaheries, and the knyghtes of *the rounde table* merveiles with theire handes; (Chapter 31)

Other collocations found in prose are *felawes of the round table*, *companye of the round table*, *banerer of the round table*, *lordes of the round table*, *lordinges of the round table*, *meyne of the round table*, *barons of the round table*, *felauship of the round table*, and *party of the round table*. Especially interesting is the use of a pronoun in the phrase, as seen in *thei of the round table* and *hem of the*

round table. If these phrases were employed, ME alliterative poets would have been able to use other alliteration sounds for their lines that contain *the round table*. This idea, however, is never favored by alliterative poets. They, unlike the prose writers, deliberately avoid using words such as *knyghtes*, *felawes*, and *companye* because that will not allow the line to alliterate on /r/.²⁴

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* provides another point of interest. There are approximately 150 occasions in which the Round Table is mentioned in his prose romance. The reversed order was accepted by Malory; many occasions indeed have the order of the noun followed by the adjective. Again *knyght* commonly precedes *the round table*:

. . . as moche as ye haue my cosyn at your desyre of your quest? Syr, I shalle telle yow, my name is Kyng Pellenore of the Ilys, and knyghte of the Table Round. (Book Three, Capitulum 13)²⁵

Thenne he said to hymself. I am a knyght of the Table Round and rather than I shold shame myn othe and my blood I wille hold my way, whatsooeuer falle therof. (Book Ten, Capitulum 53)

. . . and al was for to shewe outward that she had as grete ioye in al other knyghtes of the Table Round as she had in Sir Launcelot. (Book Eighteen, Capitulum 3)

These examples imply that the *AMA* poet could have reversed the word order of *the round table*. He does so for *fle renkes renownde* but not for *fle Rownd Table* as seen in the following line.

2912 Than fle renkes renownde of fle Rownd Table

If *the round table* is put in the middle or if other words than those starting with /r/ precede *the round table*, one of the constituents of *the round table* may not fully receive metrical stress. This can be described by the following schemes. Dots signify any unstressed syllables whereas the alliterating consonant is followed by a stress mark. The underline represents a separate word:

verse line--> . . t' . . . round táble . . t' . . . x' . . . [a(x)aax]
 verse line--> . . táble round . . t' . . . t' . . . x' . . . [a(x)aax]

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These two verse structures are possible variants of the meter if the line alliterates on /t/. It is inevitable, however, that the adjective *round* becomes metrically weak in these constructions. That is why the first x in the brackets showing the alliteration is placed in parentheses, indicating that this particular syllable may not be realized as a metrically stressed syllable. If these patterns are not plausible, the only pattern that is used for the line that contains *the round table* is as follows:

verse line--> . . r' . . . r' . . . r'óund táble [aaax]

The *AMA* poet was ambitious in using excessive repetition of the same sound more than required by alliterative meter, generating internal unity made by alliteration within the line and external unity made by identical alliteration and secondary alliteration over a group of lines. The result is an amazing and amusing form of verbal play in layers of sound repetition. Adherence to the excessive sound repetition makes the poem unique among alliterative verse written in the same period. The poet could have shown this innovative talent throughout his work. But he did not do so for *the round table* even though his potential for word play and great abundance of vocabulary are fully proved in other parts of the poem. The metrical location of *the round table* reveals that the alliterative poets could be inflexible regarding certain metrical structures.²⁶

International Christian University

Notes

¹ Tom Furniss and Michael Bath assert that the ultimate goal of verbal art is to defamiliarize ordinary language. Along with extraordinary figurative language and different view-points, poetic art utilizes various devices to reorganize sounds and produce an unfamiliar form. Furniss and Bath comment, "The pronunciation should be made difficult through the 'roughing' effects achieved by the repetition of identical sounds (rhyme, alliteration, and so on), and poetic rhythm should avoid the potentially lulling effect of regular prose rhythms by 'disordering' rhythm" (86). See *Reading Poetry* (London: Prentice Hall, 1996) 76-102.

² Citations are from *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, ed. Mary Hamel (New York: Garland, 1984). The alliteration is italicized within the line and shown between slashes on the right. In the main text of the present paper slashes are used to indicate the phonetic value of the alliterating sound and square brackets the alliteration pattern of the line.

³ For a detailed analysis about the sounds used in identical alliteration, see Yasuyo Moriya, "Identical Alliteration in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*," *English Language Notes* 38 (2000): 1-16.

⁴ Hamel 32.

⁵ James P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English: The Dialectal and Metrical Survey* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 1930) 233.

⁶ M. F. Vaughan, "Consecutive Alliteration, Strophic Patterns, and the Composition of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Modern Philology* 77 (1979): 3.

⁷ The percentage of 75.2 is quite high compared to other alliterative poems since the average appearance of identical alliteration in others is around 10-15 percent. See Vaughan 3.

⁸ Hamel 19.

⁹ I have used the terms “primary alliteration” and “secondary alliteration” in order to distinguish two different functions of /r/ in alliteration. In primary alliteration /r/ initiates the alliterating syllable while it appears as a second or third constituent of the alliterating syllable in secondary alliteration. See Yasuyo Moriya, “Alliteration Devices in the Poems of the *Pearl* Manuscript,” *Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature* 14 (1999): 27-49 for a detailed explanation of these two different realizations of /r/ in alliteration.

¹⁰ William Vantuono, *Old and Middle English Texts with Accompanying Textual and Linguistic Apparatus* (New York: Garland, 1994) 87.

¹¹ Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York: Garland, 1988) 392-93.

¹² Realizing the frequent association of *riding* and *round table* in the *AMA*, Finlayson comments, “(such an association) frequently generates an extended sequence of r alliterations, and the alliterative elements are so stereotyped as to suggest that they are formulas.” See John Finlayson, “Formulaic Technique in *Morte Arthure*,” *Anglia* 81 (1963): 386-93.

¹³ Ritzke-Rutherford defines a formula as a group of words that are restricted to a half-line, hardly variable in wording, extremely structured by sound, and often connected with a motif. See Jean Ritzke-Rutherford, “Formulaic Microstructure: The Cluster,” *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, ed. K. H. Göller (Cambridge: Brewer, 1981) 70-82.

¹⁴ Valerie Krishna, “Parataxis, Formulaic Density, and Thrift in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*,” *Speculum* 57 (1982): 63-83.

¹⁵ There are many instances of such a syntactic unit in the *AMA*. These instances reveal a striking similarity as to their metrical makeup; namely, it is usually the adjective, but not the noun, that alliterates. Yet the noun may carry alliteration in certain cases. For a discussion on metrical subordination in the *AMA*, see Yasuyo Moriya, “Alliteration and Metrical Subordination in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*,” *ICU Language Research Bulletin* 11 (1996): 149-61. As to the special role of the collocation of an adjective and a noun in allit-

erative verse see also Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1977) 89.

¹⁶ John Finlayson, "Formulaic Technique in *Morte Arthure*," *Anglia* 81 (1963): 372-93; James D. Johnson, "Formulaic Thrift in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Medium Ævum* 47 (1978): 255-61; Valerie Krishna, "Parataxis, Formulaic Density, and Thrift in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*," *Speculum* 57 (1982): 63-83; Ronald A. Waldron, "Oral-Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry," *Speculum* 32 (1957): 792-804.

¹⁷ Turville-Petre, for example, warns about the idea of ME alliterative verse as formulaic composition. See p. 92.

¹⁸ Citations are made from *Le Morte Arthur: A Romance in Stanzas of Eight Lines*, ed. J. Douglas Bruce (London: Oxford U P, 1959).

¹⁹ The whole stanza is shown below:

SMA 9 The knightis of the table Round,
SMA 10 The sangrayle whan they had sought,
SMA 11 Aunturs that they by-fore them found
SMA 12 Fynisshid and to end[e] brought;
SMA 13 Their enemyes they bette & bound,
SMA 14 For gold on lyff they lefte them noht.
SMA 15 Foure yere they lyved sound,
SMA 16 Whan they had these werkis wrought,

²⁰ In this particular metrical context the word *reuerence* seems to receive metrical stress in two places, achieving regular alliteration. The same word in line 3201, however, will receive metrical stress on its first syllable only.

²¹ Lines from *SGGK* are from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, rev. ed., eds. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: U of Exeter, 1987).

²² These metrically flexible lines often allow more than two different readings as seen with short adjectives. Criticism against a metrical theory often comes from differences in assigning stress to the line. A significant fact regarding the collocation of certain types of

words is that different readings are possible, depending on the metrical context and the readers' preference. Acknowledging all the possible readings seems more important than criticizing others' theories based on one's preference in reading. As to the flexibility of English stress, see M. Halle and S. Keyser, *English Stress: Its Form, Its Growth and Its Role in Verse* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 101-09.

²³ *Merlin or the Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance*, ed. H. Wheatley (Millwood: Kraus, 1987).

²⁴ The only exception is the word *men*. The following examples from the *AMA* show that this word can accompany *the round table*. The alliteration pattern appears after each line:

1676	The <u>ryotous men</u> and fle <i>ryche</i> of fle <i>Rounde Table</i> ,	[r-m-r-r-t]
2243	To <i>reschewe</i> fle <u>ryche men</u> of fle <i>Rounde Table</i> ,	[r-r-m-r-t]
2878	As was when fle <u>ryche men</u> of the <i>Rownde Table</i>	[r-m-r-t]
3175	This <i>roy</i> with his <u>ryall men</u> of fle <i>Rownde Table</i> ,	[r-r-m-r-t]
4081	The <i>rekeneste</i> <u>redy men</u> of fle <i>Rownde Table</i> ,	[r-r-m-r-t]
4117	<i>Redily</i> thas <u>rydde men</u> of the <i>Rownde Table</i>	[r-r-m-r-t]

The only variation of this pattern is the use of *blude*:

4282 Here *rystys* the riche blude of the *Rownde Table*. [r-r-b-r-t] y

If we assume stronger metrical stress in the adjective, these lines will show the regular [aaax] pattern of alliteration. The poet shows in this pattern as well a strong desire to place an adjective that starts with /r/ in front of *men*.

²⁵ *Caxton's Malory: A New Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur*, ed. J. Spisak (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983).

²⁶ The present paper is based on two papers, one entitled, "The Location of King Arthur's Round Table in ME Alliterative Meter," read at the thirteenth Congress of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies in December 1997, and the another entitled, "King Arthur's Round Table in the Meter of *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*," *ICU Language Research Bulletin* 15 (2000): 29-41. The author's appreciation is due to the anonymous readers of the *PMAM* for their insightful comments and careful editing.