The Alliterative Revival

The period known as the Alliterative Revival refers to the sudden appearance of works written in alliterative verse at the end of the 14th century. In Old English poetry, the alliterative verse form typically features a four-stressed line with a rhythmic pause in the middle. In the traditional alliterative poem, at least three of the stresses are alliterative. In Beowulf, one of the most popular examples of alliterative verse from Old English, the Prologue provides an excellent example of this alliterative style:

Lo, praise of the prowess of people-kings
of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!
Oft Scyld the Scefing from squadroned foes
from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore,
awing the earls.

While the version of alliterative verse used in the Revival is similar, Middle English alliteration can be distinguished by a looser, less regulated verse form with slightly longer lines. The primary texts associated with the period are the anonymous poems Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Alliterative Morte Arthure. In Pearl, the opening lines demonstrate the type of alliterative verse found in this era:

The siege and assault having ceased at Troy
as its blazing battlements blackened to ash
the man who planned and plotted that treason
had trial enough for the truest traitor!

The repetition of consonant sounds in these lines represents a clear return to the sort of poetry written around the time of Beowulf, published some six-hundred years earlier.

Some historians argue that alliterative verse was still used in oral storytelling in the period prior to the Alliterative Revival. But because the French literature was vastly more popular in the Norman royal court, the majority of existing written stories from this time are not alliterative. While alliterative verse was popular in Old English, the form fell out of favor once Anglo-Norman French became the official language. Rather than continue to written in alliterative verse, Anglo-Norman poets favored work written in rhyming couplets influenced by traditional literature from France. By the end of the 14th century, however, Middle English had once again become the language of the court; as the English language returned to favor, so too did more traditional forms of poetry, including alliterative verse. Although alliterative verse was the primary form used in the later half of the 14th-century, not all poetry composed during that time was alliterative. For instance, Chaucer wrote primarily in rhyming couplets influenced by the Anglo-Norman French. The balance of the two forms suggests that there was a rich history of literature influencing cultural productions at the time.