

How they Brought the Good News from Ghent



POEM TEXT

I.

1 I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
 2 I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
 3 "Good speed!" cried the watch, as the gate-bolts
 undrew;
 4 "Speed!" echoed the wall to us galloping through;
 5 Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
 6 And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

II.

7 Not a word to each other; we kept the great pace
 8 Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our
 place;
 9 I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
 10 Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right,
 11 Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,
 12 Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.

III.

13 'Twas moonset at starting; but while we drew near
 14 Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear;
 15 At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see;
 16 At Düffeld, 'twas morning as plain as could be;
 17 And from Mecheln church-steeple we heard the half-
 chime,
 18 So, Joris broke silence with, "Yet there is time!"

IV.

19 At Aershot, up leaped of a sudden the sun,
 20 And against him the cattle stood black every one,
 21 To stare thro' the mist at us galloping past,
 22 And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last,
 23 With resolute shoulders, each hutting away
 24 The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:

V.

25 And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent
 back
 26 For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track;
 27 And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that glance
 28 O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance!
 29 And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and anon

30 His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.

VI.

31 By Hasselt, Dirck groaned; and cried Joris, "Stay spur!
 32 "Your Roos galloped bravely, the fault's not in her,
 33 "We'll remember at Aix"—for one heard the quick
 wheeze
 34 Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering
 knees,
 35 And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
 36 As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

VII.

37 So, we were left galloping, Joris and I,
 38 Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky;
 39 The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,
 40 'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like
 chaff;
 41 Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,
 42 And "Gallop," gasped Joris, "for Aix is in sight!"

VIII.

43 "How they'll greet us!"—and all in a moment his roan
 44 Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;
 45 And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
 46 Of the news which alone could save Aix from her fate,
 47 With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
 48 And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim.

IX.

49 Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
 50 Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
 51 Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
 52 Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer;
 53 Clapped my hands, laughed and sang, any noise, bad or
 good,
 54 Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood.

X.

55 And all I remember is—friends flocking round
 56 As I sat with his head 'twixt my knees on the ground;
 57 And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine,
 58 As I poured down his throat our last measure of wine,
 59 Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)

60 Was no more than his due who brought good news from Ghent.



SUMMARY

My fellow soldiers Joris and Dirck and I all leapt onto our horses and galloped away. The watchman wished us luck as he unlocked the side door, and his good wishes echoed off the walls as the door closed and the lights of the town faded. My friends and I galloped off into the middle of the night side by side.

We didn't say one word to each other—just galloped on as fast as we could, always in the same arrangement. I adjusted my riding equipment as we went, tightening the strap that affixed my saddle to my horse's back, shortening the stirrups, re-buckling the bridle, and loosening up the bit; all my tinkering didn't slow my horse, Roland, down one bit.

The moon was just setting when we left, but as we reached the town of Lokeren, we heard the roosters beginning to crow; dawn was on its way. At the town of Boom, the morning star rose, and by the time we were in Düffeld, morning had come. When we got to Mecheln, we heard the churchbells tolling the half-hour, and my friend Joris finally spoke, saying, "There's still time!"

When we were in Aershot, the sun suddenly rose high, and we could see cows silhouetted against its light, staring at us as we galloped past them. And now I could see my brave horse Roland, his strong shoulders sending the mist flying, just the way that the spray of rivers flies when it hits the shore.

I noticed Roland's head was stretched out low as he ran. He kept one ear back to listen to me, and the other forward to listen for what was coming. His clever black eye kept looking back sideways toward me, his master, and thick foam flew from his lips as he galloped.

When we reached Hasselt, my friend Dirck cried out in dismay, and Joris told him, "Stop, stop! Your horse Roos did her best, it's not her fault that she can't run anymore. We won't forget you when we get to Aix." Dirck had no choice but to stop: we could see Roos gasping for air, staggering, and drooping, until at last she couldn't even stand anymore and sank to the ground.

So only Joris and I were left. We rushed past the towns of Looz and Tongres under a cloudless sky, with the hot sun laughing cruelly at us. The grass under the horses' feet crunched like dried husks. We went on until we saw a church-spire rising up near Dalhem. "Keep going," Joris gasped: "That's Aix on the horizon!"

"Everyone will be so glad to see us!" Joris went on—but at just that moment, his horse fell down, dead as a rock. Only my horse

Roland could carry the critical news to Aix now. Roland's flaring nostrils looked red as pools of blood, and his eyes were bloodshot, too.

So I stripped off as many of my clothes as I could to cut down on my weight, stood up in my saddle, gave Roland an encouraging pat, and affectionately called that matchless horse by his nickname. I kept on clapping, laughing, and singing to him until he finally galloped into Aix and came to a rest.

All that I remember after that is how all my friends gathered around me as I sat on the ground with Roland's head between my knees. Everyone was lavishing Roland with praise as I gave him the very last of our wine—which, the town governors unanimously voted, was only a fair reward for the horse who carried such wonderful news from Ghent.



THEMES



UNSUNG HEROISM AND HUMILITY

The speaker of this poem, who carries an urgent and hopeful message between the towns of Ghent and Aix, doesn't seem to consider himself a hero. The real hero here, in his estimation, is his horse Roland, whose valiant galloping saved the day. This speaker's humility suggests that plenty of the heroic acts that get attributed to a single savior are really the work of a whole group of unsung people (and animals!). But the poem also hints that there's something genuinely heroic about self-forgetfulness—that is, in getting caught up in a cause that takes one out of oneself.

By many standards, the speaker of this poem is the hero of the story: it's he who successfully carries the "Good News from Ghent to Aix" after his two comrades fall by the wayside. But far from tooting his own horn, this speaker doesn't even tell readers his name! He pays much more attention to what his friends Dirck and Joris did and said on their dramatic ride. His memories of Joris's encouraging cries and Dirck's stalwart persistence suggest that he doesn't want his listeners to forget that he wasn't the only one out there on the road. Delivering the "good news" was a team effort, not the work of one special guy.

That humility becomes even clearer through the speaker's focus on Roland, his horse. The speaker truly loves and admires Roland, praising him for his "intelligence" and his "peer[less]" stamina and courage. What's more, when the two of them make it to Aix, the speaker gives Roland all the credit (and the very last drops of wine he can find), calling this Roland's rightful "due" for having "brought good news from Ghent"—as if Roland himself were the messenger. And of course, he's not wrong: if Roland weren't there to carry the speaker, the "good news" would never have made it. But not every person in the speaker's position would think to give his horse so much credit.

In keeping the speaker's eye so firmly on other people and creatures, the poem suggests that heroism isn't an ego trip. Rather, it's about sacrifice and humility, leaving one's ego behind in the service of a cause. Not all heroes get famous; in fact, not all heroes are remembered at all. This nameless speaker wants to be sure that it's *other* people whom his listeners "remember at Aix"—and that's all part of his genuine, humble courage and dedication.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-6
- Between Lines 6-7
- Lines 7-12
- Between Lines 12-13
- Lines 13-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-24
- Between Lines 24-25
- Lines 25-30
- Between Lines 30-31
- Lines 31-36
- Between Lines 36-37
- Lines 37-42
- Between Lines 42-43
- Lines 43-48
- Between Lines 48-49
- Lines 49-54
- Between Lines 54-55
- Lines 55-60



MEANING AND MEMORY

In "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," a speaker recalls the day he made a desperate horseback ride to deliver an important military message. But he never tells the reader what that critical message was! Instead, he remembers the landscape he saw on the ride, his feelings of urgency and exhilaration, and the bravery and stamina of his beloved horse, Roland. By focusing on flashes of vivid (but outwardly unimportant) memory and leaving out the kinds of details that might usually make it into the history books, this poem suggests that the most meaningful moments of life are often the ones that time forgets.

As the poem begins, everything from its title to its dramatic first words—"I sprang to the stirrup"—leads readers to expect a tale of old-fashioned heroics. The story is framed like an adventure: will these riders make it to Aix with their crucial message, or not?

But as the poem develops, readers can't help but notice that the speaker records none of the things one might expect from a traditional adventure story. There aren't even any clear details about what the stakes of this message are, or why the people of

Aix need to hear it so urgently. (And according to the poet Browning himself, this poem isn't based on any real-life events at all, so there's not even a clear [allusion](#) for readers to draw upon.)

Gradually, the speaker's real point develops: what matters in his memories isn't what the "good news" was, or what a big hero he himself was for carrying it, but the sheer exhilaration and beauty of making this dramatic ride. As he recalls "galloping" across the countryside, he thinks of the changing sky with its "great yellow star[s]," the "spume-flakes" flying from his horse Roland's lips, and even the cows that stared at him and his comrades as they sped past. In other words, as he retells his story, the parts that stick with him aren't the ride's significance or heroism, but the actual experiences he had on the way.

In fact, the speaker concludes that "all [he] remember[s]" is lavishing praise (and wine) on his brave horse once they'd made it to Aix and rested, surrounded by "friends." In retelling this tale—clearly one he's told before!—the speaker suggests that, to him, the precious parts of this memory aren't recollections of being an important part of history, or earning praise for his heroism. The memories that stick around are memories of experience, and of friendship and love.

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LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

*I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;*

"Good speed!" cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;
 "Speed!" echoed the wall to us galloping through;
 Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
 And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

"How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" begins with the promise of adventure. The speaker plunges readers into the very moment when he "sprang to the stirrup," leaping on his horse to carry "Good News" on a hundred-mile journey between the city of Ghent in Belgium and the city of Aix, just over the German border. This lively *in media res* beginning suggests that the speaker of this dramatic monologue is telling a tale he's told many times before, and getting right to the good stuff.

In only a few lines, readers get a pretty clear picture of the poem's setting. Alongside the cities in the title, the distinctive names of the speaker's companions "Joris" and "Dirck" make it clear that this poem is taking place in Belgium. And the idea of delivering an urgent message on horseback—and rushing past "the watch," a guard posted at the city walls—suggests that this isn't the poet Browning's contemporary 19th-century Belgium, but some more romantic era, long ago.

In other words, the scene is set for an old-fashioned tale of derring-do, a high-spirited adventure on horseback. A crucial message needs to be delivered, and the speaker will be one of the men to deliver it. The stakes are high.

And yet, the stakes are also unclear! There's not the slightest hint of what the speaker's urgent message is. The setting suggests that this might be a military message, maybe news that will avert a battle or some other calamity—but the speaker doesn't give any further details. All readers know is that, whatever the message is, it's "Good News," and news the riders must rush to deliver.

Their urgency is reflected in the poem's very form. From the moment the speaker and his friends "spr[i]ng to the stirrup," the poem's sounds and shapes match their "galloping" speed through vivid [onomatopoeia](#).

One of the clearest examples is the poem's [polyptoton](#) on the word "gallop" itself—a word that sounds just like the swift hoofbeats it describes. Variations on "gallop" appear no fewer than five times in this first stanza alone, and three of those [repetitions](#) turn up in just one line:

I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;

The speaker's insistent repetitions seem to say that there was really an *awful lot* of galloping going on that fateful night. His [asyndeton](#) here makes that point even clearer: amidst all this action, there's no time to pause for conjunctions!

The [meter](#) gallops, too. Written in [anapestic](#) tetrameter—lines of four anapests, metrical feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm—the poem has a driving beat that imitates the speaker's wild ride.

Even the [rhyme scheme](#) here feels urgent: [couplets](#) propel the reader from one line to the next, each new rhyme rushing towards its partner.

It's no wonder, then, that the "watch" cries "'Good speed!'" to the riders as they rush out the gates of Ghent. Exhilarating speed will drive this whole poem.

But it's also meaningful that the watch's cry "echoe[s]" off the city walls as the speaker and his companions rush through—and that this echo *only repeats one word*, "'Speed!'" This will also be a story about [metaphorical](#) echoes: about storytelling, memories, and forgetting. The things the speaker remembers about his ride, readers will soon discover, aren't necessarily what one might expect—and the things he seems to *forget* are surprising and important, too.

LINES 7-12

*Not a word to each other; we kept the great pace
 Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place;
 I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
 Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right,
 Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,
 Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.*

The second stanza doubles down on the speed and urgency of the first. Here, as the speaker and his friends gallop wordlessly towards Aix, the speaker adjusts his riding gear on the fly: there's no time to stop and "rebuckle[] the cheek-strap" or tighten up the saddle's "girths"; he's got to get things in order right where he is. But none of this tinkering disturbs his horse "a whit."

The poem's shape gallops on as steadily as that stalwart horse. By now, readers will have a good feel for the poem's structure: each stanza here is a six-line [sestet](#), built from three [couplets](#). This repeated form feels both unrelenting and exciting—much like the speaker's ride.

The poem is starting to develop its characteristic music, too. Listen to the [assonance](#) in lines 7-8:

Not a word to each other; we kept the great pace
 Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our
 place;

Those repeated long /ay/ sounds reflect the riders' urgency and focus. But they also just plain sound good! All through the poem, assonance and [alliteration](#) will keep the speaker's [tone](#) exuberant: these musical sounds already hint that this adventure has the kind of happy ending that you want to sing about.

As this stanza develops, readers start to get a glimpse of what kind of a person the speaker is. An experienced horseman, a guy who knows a "pique" from a "bit," he's pragmatic and competent. And his memories of this fateful day take in a lot of,

perhaps unexpected. technical detail—three whole lines of it here, a walkthrough of proper tack maintenance. This is a man who keeps his eye on the small things.

The speaker also sees himself as one of a group. He and his fellow messengers Dirck and Joris ride "neck by neck, stride by stride": the [diacope](#) here suggests that they're a well-oiled machine, working together as one to achieve their common goal.

Even more tellingly, the speaker introduces his horse Roland by name, giving Roland just as much prominence as the human messengers. The speaker's approving observation of Roland's "stead[y]" persistence suggests that the speaker sees his horse as an important player in this story, a figure to be admired.

Readers might also note that, while they've learned a lot about the speaker already, it's not because the speaker has said even one single word about himself! He doesn't even give his name. Not only is this speaker devoted, thoughtful, generous, and competent, then: he's also *humble*, focused on anything but himself.

LINES 13-18

*'Twas moonset at starting; but while we drew near
Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear;
At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see;
At Düffeld, 'twas morning as plain as could be;
And from Mecheln church-steeple we heard the half-chime,
So, Joris broke silence with, "Yet there is time!"*

In the third stanza, the riders cover miles in six swift lines. This passage traces the first stages of the speaker's journey, following both the movements of the moon and stars and the landmarks on the ground.

The speaker's [imagery](#) here suggests that his memories of this ride are deeply impressed on his senses. Recalling the "clear" twilight that "dawned" at Lokeren and the "great yellow star" that hung over Boom, he provides oddly still and quiet images from the road—almost as if his mind were taking snapshots of the (rather lovely) scenery along the way.

But all these sights also record the passing of time. That "great yellow star" is the dawn star, Venus, and it's just one more sign that it's about to be "morning as plain as [can] be." The riders are racing against the clock. The speaker thus [juxtaposes](#) his strangely tranquil moments of observation with the driving urgency readers have come to expect from him.

Listen to the way he uses [anaphora](#) to evoke the landscape rushing past:

At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see;
At Düffeld, 'twas morning as plain as could be;

The repeated sentence structure here compresses the distance between Boom and Düffeld down to nothing: one minute the

riders are "At Boom" and the stars are out, the next they're "At Düffeld" and it's morning for real.

But they're not out of time yet. When they reach the town of Mecheln, they hear the "half-chime," the churchbell that tells them it's something-thirty in the morning. Here, the speaker's companion Joris speaks his first words: "'Yet there is time!'" This is the first of several encouraging exclamations Joris will make over the course of the poem—and the speaker's clear recall of Joris's exact words suggest that they made as big an impression on him as the dawn sky.

LINES 19-21

*At Aershot, up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare thro' the mist at us galloping past,*

At the beginning of stanza 4, the riders have reached a new town, and the sun has risen for real. In fact, it's "leaped up of a sudden"—a moment of [personification](#) that suggests the sun has become the riders' active opponent now. The higher the sun "leap[s]," the less time the messengers have to get their urgent news to Aix.

But the speaker doesn't remember feeling tense or anxious. Instead, he takes another little mental "snapshot" of the scenery. Take a look at his vivid, specific [imagery](#):

[...] up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him **the cattle stood black every one,**

The speaker here captures an impression of cows silhouetted darkly against the rising sun, "star[ing] thro' the mist" at the messengers as they barrel past. This image strikes him hard—so much so that "every one" of those cows registers individually in his memory.

This is an evocative image, one that might encourage readers to envision that morning "mist" lit up in the early sun, or even to smell the cool, grassy freshness of a morning pasture. But while this image is lovely, it also isn't exactly the kind of detail one would expect from a thrilling adventure story! The cows play no dramatic role in this tale. In fact, they're almost comical as they "stare[]" in incomprehension, as if to say: *what's the big rush?*

The image of the cows feels even more incongruous when one reflects that readers still don't know a lot of major facts: what the all-important "good news" is, for instance, or who the heck is telling this story, anyway. But these things don't seem to matter so much to the speaker. The memories that have stuck with him from this ride aren't the heroic-sounding ones—the history-book facts—but bright moments of pure experience.

LINES 22-24

*And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last,
With resolute shoulders, each hutting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:*

As the sun rises over the bewildered cattle, the speaker takes a moment to make another unusual observation. All along, he's been able to feel his "stout galloper Roland" tirelessly running—or indeed "galloping," as yet another moment of insistent, gallop-based [polyptoton](#) would have it. But now that the sun's up, he can see Roland, too.

And Roland is a pretty spectacular sight. Listen to the [onomatopoeic](#) sounds that the speaker uses as he describes his horse with a [simile](#):

With resolute shoulders, each hutting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:

All that /h/ [alliteration](#) and /uh/ [assonance](#) helps readers to feel as if they're on horseback with the speaker, listening to Roland breathing hard as he runs. (Browning even invents his own onomatopoeic word here to get this effect: "hutting," or forcefully shouldering aside.)

And the simile here, in which Roland's "resolute shoulders" make the "haze" go flying like an outcropping of rock makes river water go flying, makes Roland seem like an elemental force of nature. The admiring speaker seems in awe of his own horse.

This image will lead into a whole stanza describing Roland—a passage that makes it clear just how central a figure the horse will become.

LINES 25-30

*And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent back
For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track;
And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that glance
O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance!
And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and anon
His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.*

Now that the sun has risen and the speaker can see Roland properly, he finds himself caught up in admiration for his horse. He looks Roland over, noting all the marks of Roland's "intelligence," stamina, and bravery in a passage of detailed [imagery](#).

In these lines, Roland and the speaker seem to be working as one. The speaker notices, for instance, that Roland keeps "one sharp ear bent back" to hear his "master[']s" voice, and keeps flashing a dark, intelligent "glance" back at him, too. Under the speaker's guidance, Roland is utterly focused on his task. His other ear is "pricked out on his track," listening out to the road ahead, and he's "galloping" so hard ("galloping" again!) that his "fierce lips" spray "thick heavy spume-flakes": he's foaming at the mouth from sheer exertion.

This stanza [characterizes](#) Roland as a loyal and valiant steed, but it also characterizes the speaker. Once again, readers get a sense that this messenger is an observant, thoughtful, and

appreciative kind of person. Another rider might merely have noted that his horse ran hard—but this speaker really marvels at Roland's strength and courage.

This stanza also seems to stretch time out, where previous stanzas compressed it. In earlier stanzas, the speaker catches just a glimpse or two of the landscape as it flashes past. Here, the speaker records details he had a long, long time to notice: Roland, after all, was there for the whole trip, "aye and anon" (that is, constantly). The galloping [meter](#) here evokes not just the ride, but the galloper himself.

LINES 31-36

*By Hasselt, Dirck groaned; and cried Joris, "Stay spur!
"Your Roos galloped bravely, the fault's not in her,
"We'll remember at Aix"—for one heard the quick wheeze
Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering knees,
And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.*

Things start to get more dramatic in stanza 6: one of the messengers, Dirck, is forced to drop out of the team when his horse Roos collapses from exhaustion.

At this moment of peril and suffering, the riders' genuine care for each other shines through. Joris—the messenger whose encouraging cry of "'Yet there is time!'" stuck in the speaker's memory back in stanza 3—here offers consolation to both Dirck and Roos. It's not Roos's fault she can't go on any further, he says: she "galloped bravely."

Again, a horse becomes a named character here, playing as much a part in the drama as any of the messengers. (And touchingly, "Roos" means "Rose" in Dutch—it's an affectionate name to give a horse.)

And the speaker seems to suffer with Roos as she falls. Take a look at his [imagery](#) here:

[...] one heard the quick wheeze
Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering
knees,
And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,

This specific description suggests the speaker's empathy for this poor horse—as does Dirck's "groan" as he feels Roos starting to fail. And once again, [onomatopoeia](#) draws readers into the scene. The [assonant](#) /ee/ sounds of "wheeze," "knees," and "heave" meets the bony /st/ [alliteration](#) of "stretched" and "staggering" and the breathy /h/ of "horrible heave": all sounds that evoke the gasping and stumbling they describe.

This scene ratchets up the story's tension. Now readers know, not just that this ride was long and arduous, but that there was a genuine chance the riders simply won't make it. The story certainly has a happy ending—this is, after all, a poem about "How they Brought the Good News," not how they tried real

hard to bring the good news but failed. But that happy ending, this stanza shows, will be hard-won.

But the most subtly important part of this stanza might be the end of Joris's cry: "We'll remember at Aix." This line again underscores the sweet relationship between all the men and horses here; Joris is letting Dirck know that he won't be forgotten just because he didn't make it all the way. It also draws readers' attention to the idea of remembering.

This whole poem, recall, is a memory: the speaker is telling his story (perhaps for the umpteenth time). And it's a memory that takes in the kinds of details that sometimes *don't* get remembered. Here, the speaker gives special attention to characters who'd be less likely to make it into the history books: to the horses, and to the guy who didn't quite make it to Aix.

Remembering Roos, Roland, Dirck, and Joris by name—but saying nothing about himself—this speaker suggests that heroism is a team effort, built on the backs of people and creatures who often disappear from memory.

LINES 37-42

*So, we were left galloping, Joris and I,
Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky;
The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,
'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff;
Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,
And "Gallop," gasped Joris, "for Aix is in sight!"*

As the messengers rush on—now without Dirck and poor old Roos—their ride only gets more difficult. The [personified](#) sun that first appeared in stanza 4 shows up again, this time as a "pitiless" adversary, laughing cruelly at them as they gallop through the worsening heat of the day.

Now, the speaker remembers the dry, baked landscape. Listen to the [onomatopoeic](#) sounds in his [simile](#) here:

'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff;

The [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in this image sound just like the dried-out "stubble" fields crunching under the horses' hooves.

The [imagery](#) works on the eye as well as the ear—and again gives readers a sense of the speaker's poetic vision. Many hot, weary riders would have noticed that the dry grass crunched; not all of them would also have noticed that it looked "bright," a word that suggests not just glaring sunlight, but *beauty*. Even at this difficult, sweaty juncture, the speaker's memory illuminates the scene with appreciation and even delight. Perhaps it's like the great Roman poet Vergil [famously said](#): remembering hard times later can be a pleasure.

And the speaker has other reasons to remember this stretch of the journey cheerfully, too. At last, a rising "dome-spire" (the tower of Aix's [ancient cathedral](#)) makes Joris cry, "Aix is in

sight!"

LINES 43-48

*"How they'll greet us!"—and all in a moment his roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;
And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
Of the news which alone could save Aix from her fate,
With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim.*

Joris is anticipating the warm welcome he and the speaker will meet in Aix when disaster strikes again: Joris's "roan" (or many-colored) horse falls down dead from exhaustion.

Listen to the way the speaker's phrasing evokes the shock of this moment:

"How they'll greet us!"—and all in a moment his roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;

[Parallelism](#) and [asyndeton](#) work together here to make the roan's death seem to come out of nowhere. One moment the horse actively "roll[s]", the next it passively "[i]es dead," without so much as a conjunction to soften the blow.

With this one last quotation from the brave and loving Joris, the poem bids him goodbye: now only the speaker and Roland "bear the whole weight" of getting the all-important news to Aix.

The speaker's [simile](#) here suggests just how desperate this last stretch of ride will feel. He looks at Roland again and sees "his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim," adding a note of unease to the poem's high-spirited [tone](#). By this point, at least one of the horses has died (and maybe two; Roos's fate is unclear). This image of "blood" might make readers worry for Roland a bit—and for the speaker, who clearly loves his "horse without peer."

"Pits full of blood" might also hint at the potential consequences if the "good news" *doesn't* get to Aix. If the speaker is carrying a military message, then he might be the only one who can avert terrible violence.

In other words, as the speaker launches into the last stretch of his story, the stakes are high.

LINES 49-54

*Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer;
Clapped my hands, laughed and sang, any noise, bad or good,
Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood.*

It's just the speaker and Roland carrying the message now. "Aix is in sight," but Roland might be on his last legs. So the speaker starts to get creative. His novel way of lightening Roland's load

is to strip, casting off as much weight as he can, like a hot air balloonist dumping ballast.

Take a look at the [parallelism](#) in these lines:

Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer;

This verb-driven structure might sound familiar: it works almost exactly like stanza 2, when the speaker meticulously adjusted all his riding tack on the fly. Here, though, his actions feel wilder and less measured. Readers can imagine him zooming past, scattering coat and boots and holsters willy-nilly in his wake.

And the speaker isn't just dropping weight here: he's providing encouragement. Touchingly, he not only gives Roland an affectionate pat, but calls him his "pet-name" (or nickname)—a pet-name he declines to let readers in on, so we can just guess ("Rollie?" "Rollo?" "Bestest Horse?"). It won't just be a lighter load that helps Roland through those last few miles, in other words, but comradeship and love.

These seem in plentiful supply as the speaker and Roland make the final dash. Stripped of his coat and boots, no doubt exhausted himself, the speaker doesn't spend even a line on his own heroism. Instead, he just remembers how he "laughed and sang" to Roland.

When, in the final line of this stanza, Roland makes it to Aix at last, readers thus get the feeling that what matters to the speaker isn't his own triumph, or even the relief of averting a crisis. It's his pride in his noble steed—the horse who has been his constant companion all through his adventure.

LINES 55-60

*And all I remember is—friends flocking round
As I sat with his head 'twixt my knees on the ground;
And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine,
As I poured down his throat our last measure of wine,
Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
Was no more than his due who brought good news from
Ghent.*

The moving first lines of the final stanza bring readers around to questions of memory again. Here, after a poem full of exhilarating speed and strange sights, the speaker claims that "all [he] remember[s] is—friends flocking round."

That is, he doesn't remember delivering the "good news," or watching the relief dawning on the faces of the people around him, or finally getting out of the saddle. He just remembers being surrounded by friends—and gently holding the wrung-out Roland's head "'twixt [his] knees on the ground." This

moment casts a new light over the whole poem.

Here in the final stanza, readers discover that this story is getting told by the guy who, in any history-book version of events, would be the capital-H Hero, the one who made it to Aix. But the speaker doesn't seem to think of himself as the [protagonist](#) here: the poem is over and he still hasn't even told readers his own name.

As this speaker reminisces, what seems to have stuck with him isn't his own victory, or even his message's historical or political importance. It's been what he *saw* and *experienced*: the cows standing "blackly" in the field, the "bright brittle stubble," and the brave Roland's shoulders "hutting away / The mist."

In fact, in this last stanza, the speaker sees *Roland* as the one who saved the day. He and the town's "burgesses" (or governors) all agree to reward Roland with the last drops of wine they can find in Aix (a detail that hints the city has been under siege, with supplies running low). That's "no more than his due," they say, since Roland "brought good news from Ghent."

The speaker isn't wrong, of course: without Roland, the news would never have made it. But it takes a humble guy—one might even say a *self-forgetful* guy—to give all the credit to his horse, no matter how much he likes him.

Think back to what Joris said when Dirck and Roos couldn't go on any longer: "'We'll remember at Aix.'" This poem, in the end, is about memory, but also about who and what gets remembered or forgotten. What this speaker "remember[s] at Aix" is not blustery heroism, but the down-to-earth joys of beauty, exhilaration, shared purpose, and friendship. Perhaps, this poem suggests, that kind of selfless delight is part of what heroism actually *is*.



POETIC DEVICES

ONOMATOPOEIA

This poem is famous for its [onomatopoeia](#), a device that helps to bring the speaker's exhilarating ride to life.

The most obvious (and insistent) onomatopoeia here is the speaker's use of the words "galloping," "galloped," and even "galloper." These words themselves have a galloping rhythm and evoke the *clop* of hooves with their /l/, /p/, and /g/ sounds. Hardly a stanza goes by without a variation on "gallop"; some version of the word appears no fewer than 13 times! Galloping onomatopoeia thus underpins the whole poem, making the verse sound just like the wild horseback ride it describes.

Elsewhere, certain words work like sound effects—as when the speaker describes the horse Roos's exhausted "wheeze" as she collapses, or the "spray" of mist around the horse Roland as he (you guessed it) "gallop[s] on."

These little moments help readers to hear the speaker's ride as

well as envision it. When the speaker remembers the "bright brittle stubble" that "broke" under his horse's hooves, for instance, readers can both sink into the visual [imagery](#) and hear the stubble crunching in all those /b/, /r/, and /t/ sounds.

Onomatopoeia is, in short, a big part of what makes this poem fun. These evocative sounds help readers to feel like they're right there with the speaker, riding along on this adventure.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "galloped," "galloped," "galloped"
- **Line 4:** "galloping"
- **Line 6:** "galloped"
- **Line 12:** "galloped"
- **Line 14:** "cocks crew"
- **Line 21:** "galloping past"
- **Line 22:** "galloper"
- **Line 24:** "its spray"
- **Line 29:** "spume-flakes"
- **Line 30:** "galloping"
- **Line 32:** "galloped"
- **Line 33:** "wheeze"
- **Line 37:** "galloping"
- **Line 40:** "feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff"
- **Line 42:** "Gallop"
- **Line 53:** "Clapped"
- **Line 54:** "galloped"

IMAGERY

Besides painting a picture of the speaker's memories, [imagery](#) draws attention to the *nature* of those memories, describing in detail a lot of moments that one wouldn't expect to find recorded in a history book. Imagery thus helps to give readers a feel, not just for the speaker's experiences, but for his personality.

For instance, take a look at this passage:

At Aershot, up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare thro' the mist at us galloping past,

This image of a bunch of cows gazing uncomprehendingly at the speaker as he and his friends zoom past is almost comical. To the cows, this is just another ordinary day, and all the riders' concerns don't mean a thing to them. But there's also something beautiful about this image—and it seems to be the beauty here that's captured the speaker's attention. That he even *remembers* noticing cows blackly silhouetted against the early sunlight suggests that he's not just a gruff military man, but a poetic soul.

Imagery also lets readers know that this speaker is an empathetic and selfless kind of guy. Take a look at his

description of his beloved horse Roland:

And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that glance
O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance!
And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and
anon
His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.

Here, the speaker seems to sink into admiration, appreciating both Roland's dark, clever eye and his valiant efforts: his horse is running so hard that "spume-flakes" (bits of froth) fly from his mouth. The speaker will later give similar sympathetic attention to his friend Dirck's horse Roos, who collapses from exhaustion with "stretched neck and staggering knees."

All of these details help readers to picture the scene, but they also draw attention to what the speaker *doesn't* describe: himself! He's so caught up in paying loving attention to the landscapes and creatures around him that he doesn't even bother to report his own name. His *lack* of self-description becomes a kind of negative-space self-portrait. What readers learn from what the speaker describes is that he doesn't think too much about himself.

The poem's imagery thus helps readers to inhabit the speaker's experience, both by vividly evoking the ride, and by giving readers a sense of what it might be like to be a loving, self-forgetful kind of person.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "while we drew near / Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear; / At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see; / At Düffeld, 'twas morning as plain as could be;"
- **Lines 19-21:** "up leaped of a sudden the sun, / And against him the cattle stood black every one, / To stare thro' the mist at us galloping past,"
- **Lines 23-24:** "With resolute shoulders, each hutting away / The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:"
- **Lines 25-30:** "And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent back / For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track; / And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that glance / O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance! / And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and anon / His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on."
- **Lines 33-36:** "for one heard the quick wheeze / Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering knees, / And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank, / As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank."
- **Lines 39-41:** "The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh, / 'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff; / Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,"
- **Lines 47-48:** "With his nostrils like pits full of blood to

the brim, / And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim."

REPETITION

Different flavors of [repetition](#) help to give the poem its urgent, driving energy.

One of the most prominent kinds of repetition here is the poem's persistent [polyptoton](#) on words derived from "gallop": "galloped," "galloping," and "galloper" make lots of appearances all through the poem. There's a clear storytelling reason for this: nearly everything in this poem happens while there's some "galloping" going on, and insistent repetition never lets readers forget that. (This repetition has struck some readers as unintentionally funny—see the Resources section for a parodic example!)

Meanwhile, [diacope](#) often gives the poem some extra punch:

Not a word to each other; we kept the great pace
Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place;

These paired repetitions underline the point that the riders are evenly, steadily keeping pace with each other: they're a well-matched, collaborative team.

The poem also uses [anaphora](#) to evoke the messengers' urgent journey. For instance, take a look at this passage:

At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see;
At Düffeld, 'twas morning as plain as could be;

The anaphora here eats up the distance between two towns and two times: the messengers are galloping so fast that the space in between "Boom" and "Düffeld" hardly seems to register.

Repetitions thus give this poem a lot of its gusto and energy.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "galloped," "galloped," "galloped"
- **Line 3:** "speed"
- **Line 4:** "Speed," "galloping"
- **Line 6:** "galloped"
- **Line 8:** "Neck by neck, stride by stride"
- **Line 12:** "galloped"
- **Line 15:** "At"
- **Line 16:** "At"
- **Line 19:** "At"
- **Line 21:** "galloping"
- **Line 22:** "galloper"
- **Line 25:** "And"
- **Line 27:** "And"

- **Line 29:** "And"
- **Line 35:** "sunk"
- **Line 36:** "sank"
- **Line 37:** "galloping"
- **Line 38:** "Past," "past"
- **Line 42:** "Gallop"
- **Line 54:** "galloped"
- **Line 55:** "And"
- **Line 56:** "As I"
- **Line 57:** "And"
- **Line 58:** "As I"

PERSONIFICATION

When the speaker [personifies](#) the sun, he helps readers to feel that the messengers are pitted against time and the weather on their heroic ride.

The sun behaves like a human twice in this poem. First, it "leap[s] up of a sudden" as the riders reach the town of Aershot—an active image that suggests that time is the riders' enemy. Just a line before, the speaker's friend Joris hopefully remarked, "'Yet there is time!'"—so the sun's inconveniently swift "leap" makes it seem like a dangerous opponent, one who might be winning.

That feeling gets even clearer when the speaker describes the sun "laugh[ing] a pitiless laugh" as the messengers gallop under a cloudless sky. By this point in the ride, Dirck and his poor horse Roos have already had to drop out from sheer exhaustion, and the "pitiless" sun doesn't seem likely to extend any mercy to the remaining riders, who barrel through a "brittle," dried-out landscape below. Here, not just time but the environment is set against them.

These moments of personification thus raise the poem's dramatic stakes. It's not just that the riders have to get their message to Ghent, but that the whole world seems to stand in their way.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "up leaped of a sudden the sun, / And against him the cattle stood black every one,"
- **Line 39:** "The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,"

SIMILE

Vivid [similes](#) help readers to see the speaker's adventure in their minds' eyes.

For instance, look at this passage describing Roland, the speaker's valiant horse:

And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last,
With resolute shoulders, each hutting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:

Describing Roland's strong shoulders as cliffs against which a river dashes itself, the speaker makes his horse sound like a true force of nature, more than equal to the task ahead of him.

But by the time both of the speaker's fellow riders have dropped out with exhausted or dead horses ("dead as a stone," in fact—another simile!), even Roland shows some strain:

And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
Of the news which alone could save Aix from her
fate,
With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,

On the one hand, this simile is just an evocative description of a horse's flaring, blood-red nostrils. On the other, it adds a sinister note to this otherwise pretty upbeat poem. "Pits full of blood" sound a lot like a terrible consequence of battle—perhaps the kind of battle the speaker's message might, hypothetically, avert.

The poem's last simile is less dramatic, but just as vivid:

'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like
chaff;

Here, the speaker compares "stubble," or the dried-out stumps of grasses in a mowed field, to "chaff," the inedible husks of wheat grains. This is an oddly close comparison: that "stubble" definitely produced "chaff" itself at some point, they're two parts of the same plant. But comparing "stubble" to "chaff" gives readers a double-dose of dried-out desperation. At this point in the poem, the sun is beating down, Dirck and his horse Roos have already collapsed, and it seems as if the messengers' ride might be *fruitless*: all stubble and chaff, no wheat!

The poem's similes thus paint vivid pictures, but also hint at the real stakes of this ride.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "each hutting away / The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:"
- **Line 40:** "'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff"
- **Line 44:** "dead as a stone;"
- **Line 47:** "With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,"

ENJAMBMENT

Occasional [enjambments](#) help the poem to rush along as quickly as the riders—or to gasp like a weary horse.

Speedy enjambments appear in stanza 5, when the speaker describes Roland at length. Each [couplet](#) in this [sestet](#) is enjambed, like this:

And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent
back
For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track;
And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that **glance**
O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance!

It makes sense that the speaker's sentences swoop on over the line breaks here: he's describing Roland in the act of galloping. Enjambment allows the poem's continuous movement to mirror *Roland's* continuous movement.

Elsewhere, though, enjambment can have the exact opposite effect. Take a look at this moment in stanza 6, when Dirck's horse Roos starts to fail:

"We'll remember at Aix"—for one heard the quick
wheeze
Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering
knees,

The break between "wheeze" and "of"—a break one would never introduce in everyday speech—is almost [onomatopoeic](#), suggesting poor Roos's gasps.

Enjambments thus imitate the poem's action in more ways than one, evoking both the speed and the strain of the messengers' dramatic ride.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "pace / Neck"
- **Lines 13-14:** "near / Lokeren"
- **Lines 23-24:** "away / The"
- **Lines 25-26:** "back / For"
- **Lines 27-28:** "glance / O'er"
- **Lines 29-30:** "anon / His"
- **Lines 33-34:** "wheeze / Of"
- **Lines 43-44:** "roan / Rolled"
- **Lines 45-46:** "weight / Of"
- **Lines 55-56:** "round / As"
- **Lines 59-60:** "consent) / Was"

ALLITERATION

The poem's frequent [alliteration](#) helps to create a mood of high-spirited energy, to draw attention to important moments, and to give the poem some lively music.

A lot of the alliteration here helps readers to feel like they're in the scene with the speaker. For instance, listen to the alliteration in this uncomfortably vivid passage:

[...] for one heard the quick wheeze
Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering
knees,
And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,

As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

Here, as poor old Roos the horse collapses from exhaustion, alliteration emphasizes her suffering: most of the alliterative words here draw attention to the speaker's painful [imagery](#). But the particular alliterative sounds the speaker chooses here also evoke Roos's pain. All those heavy /h/ sounds, wheezing /sh/ sounds, and choked-off /st/ sounds help readers to feel Roos's gasps for breath in their own bodies.

A few lines later, alliteration encourages readers to notice a different kind of detail:

'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff;

The /br/ sounds in that "brittle bright stubble" is again [onomatopoeic](#), suggesting the crunch of dry grass under hooves. But all those strong sounds in a row also draw an awful lot of attention to what might at first seem like a relatively unimportant detail, encouraging readers to think about what the speaker notices, what matters to him. The memory of that "brittle bright stubble" seems to have stayed with him more clearly than his memory of the actual "good news" he carried. And listen to the way he describes finally celebrating in Ghent, in the very last lines of the poem:

Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
Was no more than his due who brought good news
from Ghent.

These closing one-two punches of alliteration feel like the cherry on top of all this poem's good humor and energy. Here, the alliterative sounds aren't particularly onomatopoeic or evocative: they just plain sound nice, and close the poem on a note of musical cheer.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sprang," "stirrup"
- **Line 3:** "Good," "gate"
- **Line 4:** "galloping"
- **Line 8:** "Neck," "neck," "never"
- **Line 10:** "shortened," "stirrup," "set"
- **Line 11:** "cheek," "chained"
- **Line 14:** "cocks," "crew," "clear"
- **Line 17:** "church," "heard," "half," "chime"
- **Line 19:** "sudden," "sun"
- **Line 23:** "hutting"
- **Line 24:** "haze," "headland"
- **Line 25:** "bent back"
- **Line 29:** "aye and anon"
- **Line 31:** "Stay spur!"

- **Line 34:** "stretched," "staggering"
- **Line 35:** "horrible heave"
- **Line 36:** "haunches," "she shuddered"
- **Line 40:** "broke," "brittle bright"
- **Line 41:** "Dalhem," "dome"
- **Line 42:** "Gallop," "gasped"
- **Line 43:** "roan"
- **Line 44:** "Rolled"
- **Line 47:** "blood," "brim"
- **Line 48:** "red," "rim"
- **Line 51:** "Stood," "stirrup"
- **Line 52:** "pet," "peer"
- **Line 55:** "friends flocking"
- **Line 59:** "common consent"
- **Line 60:** "good," "Ghent"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#), like [alliteration](#), gives this poem some evocative music.

For instance, consider this description of the speaker's horse:

With resolute shoulders, each hutting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:

The /uh/ [assonance](#) of "hutting" and "bluff" here evokes Roland's heavy breathing and blunt, muscular effort.

Now listen to the harmonies in this line from the closing stanza:

And all I remember is—friends flocking round

This is just a subtle moment of assonance—a little /eh/ sound linking what the speaker "remembers" to his "friends." But that gentle harmony underlines an important point: what the speaker remembers best of his grand adventure is his feelings of comradery and friendship.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "we," "three"
- **Line 6:** "into," "midnight"
- **Line 7:** "great pace"
- **Line 8:** "changing," "place"
- **Line 9:** "turned," "girths"
- **Line 12:** "less steadily"
- **Line 18:** "silence," "time"
- **Line 19:** "up," "sudden," "sun"
- **Line 20:** "cattle," "black"
- **Line 21:** "galloping past"
- **Line 22:** "galloper," "last"
- **Line 23:** "hutting"
- **Line 24:** "bluff"

- **Line 26:** “track”
- **Line 27:** “black”
- **Line 28:** “master, askance”
- **Line 34:** “stretched neck”
- **Line 40:** “Neath,” “feet”
- **Line 41:** “spire,” “white”
- **Line 43:** “moment,” “roan”
- **Line 45:** “there,” “bear”
- **Line 46:** “Aix,” “fate”
- **Line 47:** “pits,” “brim”
- **Line 51:** “up,” “stirrup”
- **Line 53:** “hands,” “sang”
- **Line 55:** “remember,” “friends”
- **Line 57:** “no,” “Roland”
- **Line 59:** “common consent”
- **Line 60:** “due who”

ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) helps to keep the poem's pace snappy and to create suspense. And it starts playing this role early on! Take a look at the asyndeton in line 2:

I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;

By leaving out conjunctions here, the speaker focuses squarely on the [diacope](#) of “galloped,” keeping the rhythm of this line urgent.

Down in line 44, meanwhile, asyndeton introduces a shock:

“How they'll greet us!”—and all in a moment his roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;

By leaving out a conjunction here, the speaker makes the roan horse's death feel painfully abrupt. It's as if it happens so quickly that there isn't even time for an “and.”

Asyndeton is at its strongest in stanza 9, as the poem's suspense peaks:

Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,

There's not one single conjunction in this whole passage. That makes the speaker's rushed bid to cast off weight feel even more frantic. Again, there's no time here to pause and introduce a conjunction: there's only time for active verbs.

Asyndeton thus works in tandem with the galloping [meter](#) and its lively [repetitions](#) to bring the poem's tension to a boil.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;”
- **Line 8:** “Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place”
- **Line 11:** “Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,”
- **Line 44:** “Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone”
- **Lines 49-52:** “Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall, / Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all, / Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear, / Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer”

PARALLELISM

Frequent [parallelism](#) works in tandem with many other devices to give this poem its swift forward thrust, and some moments of surprise.

For example, listen to the parallelism in this dramatic moment:

Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,

This repeated sentence structure (with a little help from [asyndeton](#)) suggests speed and urgency, putting the verbs that describe the speaker's desperate stripping front and center.

This passage, in fact, works a lot like a similar one earlier in the poem:

I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right,
Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,

This passage describes the speaker adjusting his riding tack on the fly, and its parallelism makes his efforts sound as speedy as his later rush to throw away excess weight! But it also makes him sound deliberate and careful, as if he knows exactly which actions to take in which order to get his saddle and bridle fixed up right.

Elsewhere, parallelism introduces a sudden shock:

“How they'll greet us!”—and all in a moment his roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;

The parallelism here makes the poor roan horse's death sound lightning-quick: one moment she's galloping, the next she rolls over, the next she's “dead as a stone.”

The poem is also full of [anaphora](#), a related device—see the Repetition section for more on that.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped”

- **Line 3:** "'Good speed!" cried the watch"
- **Line 4:** "'Speed!" echoed the wall"
- **Lines 9-11:** "I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight, / Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right, / Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,"
- **Line 15:** "At Boom,"
- **Line 16:** "At Düffeld,"
- **Line 19:** "At Aershot,"
- **Line 20:** "And"
- **Line 22:** "And"
- **Line 25:** "And"
- **Line 27:** "And"
- **Line 29:** "And"
- **Line 33:** "heard the quick wheeze"
- **Line 34:** "saw the stretched neck"
- **Line 44:** "Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;"
- **Line 45:** "And"
- **Line 47:** "With"
- **Line 48:** "And," "with"
- **Lines 49-53:** "Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall, / Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all, / Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear, / Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer; / Clapped my hands, laughed and sang, "
- **Line 55:** "And"
- **Line 56:** "As I"
- **Line 57:** "And"
- **Line 58:** "As I"

Hutting (Line 23) - An [onomatopoeic](#) word of Browning's own invention, which suggests the horse's muscular strength shouldering the mist aside.

As some bluff river headland its spray (Line 24) - In other words, Roland is galloping so hard that he sends the "haze" flying around him, the same way that a rocky outcropping sends river-spray flying.

Pricked out (Line 26) - Held to attention.

Askance (Line 28) - At an odd angle, slanted.

Spume-flakes (Line 29) - Flying bits of frothy spit.

Aye and anon (Line 29) - Always, constantly.

Flank (Line 35) - The horse's sides.

Stubble (Line 40) - The short bits of grass or hay left in a field after mowing.

Chaff (Line 40) - The dry husk that surrounds a grain of wheat.

Dome-spire (Line 41) - The roof of a church—a round dome with a tall tapering tower attached.

Roan (Line 43) - A horse with a mottled coat.

Croup (Line 44) - A horse's hindquarters.

Buffcoat (Line 49) - A type of leather coat often worn by mounted soldiers.

Holster (Line 49) - Gun-holders attached to a belt.

Jack-boots (Line 50) - Knee-length leather boots.

'Twixt (Line 56) - Between.

Burgesses (Line 59) - Members of the town government.



VOCABULARY

Stirrup (Line 1, Line 10, Line 51) - The foot-holds on a saddle.

Watch (Line 3) - The watchman who guards the gates.

Postern (Line 5) - A side or back door—a secondary entrance.

Abreast (Line 6) - In a row, next to each other.

Girths (Line 9) - The straps of a saddle that wrap around the horse's belly.

Pique (Line 10) - The high point in the front of a saddle.

Cheek-strap (Line 11) - The part of the horse's bridle that crosses its cheeks.

Bit (Line 11) - The part of a bridle that goes into the horse's mouth, allowing the rider to steer.

Whit (Line 12) - A tiny bit.

Half-chime (Line 17) - A bell that marks thirty minutes past the hour.

Thro' (Line 21) - An abbreviation of "through."



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" is a dramatic monologue, a tale told in the voice of a particular character—in this case, a messenger remembering the day he carried a piece of critical news.

The dramatic monologue form invites readers to think not just about the events this speaker describes, but about the way he describes them. Here, what the speaker *doesn't* say is just as important as what he *does* say. He doesn't tell readers his own name, or even what the fateful message he carried was. Instead, he remembers the moment-by-moment events of the ride itself, and gives all the credit for his heroism to his horse!

These choices suggest that this is a poem, not about great deeds and personal valor, but about devotion, companionship, and sheer exhilaration.

The poem's shape echoes this interest in down-to-earth, moment-to-moment life. The poem uses ten six-line stanzas, or [sestets](#), all written in galloping [anapestic](#) tetrameter (see the

Meter section for a full metrical explanation). This energetic, ever-building form helps readers to feel swept up in the speaker's experience, reliving it alongside him.

METER

An exuberant, [onomatopoeic](#) meter is one of this poem's most distinctive features. The poem is written in [anapestic tetrameter](#), which means it uses lines of four anapests, metrical feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm. Fittingly enough, this meter sounds like nothing so much as a galloping horse!

Here's a good example from lines 57-58:

And no voice | but was prais- | ing this Ro- | land of
mine,
As I poured | down his throat | our last meas- | ure of
wine,

Besides mimicking hoofbeats, the rat-tat-TAT quality of the meter here feels energetic and joyful.

Small variations keep this meter lively. Many lines start with an [iamb](#) (a foot with a da-DUM rhythm) rather than an anapest, like this:

Nor gal- | loped less stead- | ily Ro- | land a whit.

Iambic lead-ins like this are a pretty common trick in anapestic poetry: without breaking the meter's stride, they allow for a little flexibility.

The poem's driving meter echoes both the sounds and the exuberance of the speaker's wild ride.

RHYME SCHEME

Every stanza of "How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" uses this energetic, driving [rhyme scheme](#):

AABBCC

These rhymed [couplets](#) work with the galloping [meter](#) to evoke the tension and exhilaration of the ride from Ghent to Aix. Couplets tend to rush the reader along: feeling that another rhyme is always just about to hit, readers hurry forward to find out what it will be! This steady onward momentum matches the speed and urgency of the heroic, single-minded riders.

The rhyme scheme is thus all part of the way this poem brings its readers along for the wild ride.



SPEAKER

This poem's generous, energetic speaker doesn't tell readers anything about himself directly—not even his name. But it's through the speaker's reticence that readers get a sense of what kind of person he is.

In the history-book version of his story, the speaker would be the hero, the messenger who made a desperate gallop from Ghent to Aix with game-changing news. But in the speaker's own telling, his horse Roland deserves all the credit! "All [he] remember[s]" of his valiant ride is his "friends flocking round" as he praises his beloved horse for its courage.

Focusing on Roland, on his fellow riders who didn't make it the whole way, and on the details of the landscape around him, this speaker seems more invested in friendship, adventure, and pure experience than he is in victory or glory. He's a brave and loving soul.



SETTING

The setting of this poem whips by as the speaker gallops through it. The speaker's ride carries him over a 100-mile stretch of terrain between Ghent (a town in Belgium) and Aix (a German city now known as Aachen). Focused on his task, the speaker doesn't get the chance to notice much about the many towns he passes; he only records flashes of the scenery, from the "great yellow star" that rises over Boom to the cattle that "stare" at the riders as they pass.

The few details of the setting the speaker *does* notice suggest that this poem is taking place during a hot summer—but in exactly what year, decade, or even century is hard to say. Browning insisted that he had no particular incident or war in mind as he wrote this poem: part of the point here is that the political specifics don't matter as much as this one rider's experience! However, the details of the speaker's clothing (and the very idea of a desperate horseback ride) lead many to imagine this poem taking place sometime in the 16th century.

That vaguely antique setting, alongside glimpses of the picturesque European countryside, helps this poem to feel like the very picture of a "dramatic romance," as its collection's title promises.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Browning (1812-1889) is now considered one of the foremost Victorian poets. But during Browning's lifetime, many readers didn't quite know what to do with his distinctive style. His love of dramatic monologues and his strange syntax stood in contrast with the lyrical elegance of the most popular poets of the day, like [Tennyson](#)—or indeed, like Browning's own wife, the wildly famous [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#). Many critics felt that Browning should have given up poetry to write novels; [Oscar Wilde](#) even once quipped that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning."

But this wasn't an insult! Wilde was actually a big fan of

Browning's work and only one member of the devoted following that Browning gained toward the end of his life. Later on, 20th-century Modernist poets like [Ezra Pound](#) would admire Browning's exuberant language, stylistic innovations, and eye for psychological complexity. Some see Browning as a poetic counterpart to the great novelist [George Eliot](#): a writer with a deep interest in why people do what they do.

In a back catalog full of [murder](#) and [more murder](#), "How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" is one of Browning's most upbeat and exuberant poems. Perhaps it's for that reason that Thomas Edison asked Browning to recite it for a phonograph recording. (Check out a link to this, the only record of Browning's voice, in the Resources section.) Appropriately enough for a recital of a poem about remembering and forgetting, Browning couldn't remember all the words.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Browning's Victorian context shines a little light on this poem's historical fiction of a medieval or Renaissance world. Browning was only one of many 19th-century British artists with a taste for romantic tales of the past: writers from [Tennyson](#) to [Walter Scott](#) told stories set in a more or less mythological Old Europe.

Browning [insisted](#) that this poem wasn't based on any events in particular, and that he was merely using the "annals of Flanders" in the war-torn 16th century to provide a dramatic setting. Some readers still like to imagine that the "Good News" of the title refers to the [Pacification of Ghent](#). But really, Browning's choice not to relate this poem to any known historical event is what's meaningful here. Like many Victorians, he's using a legendary vision of the past to explore memory and nostalgia.

For Victorian England was positively riddled with nostalgia. After Queen Victoria's beloved husband Albert died, mourning practically became the national sport. Victorians also mourned a changing world: the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, and old rural ways of life were coming to an end as mechanization (literally) gained steam.

This poem's interest in memory and forgetfulness—and its speaker's fondness for small details and warm comradeship—thus fits right in with a wistful Victorian worldview.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Browning's Voice](#) — Listen to Browning himself reciting

the poem's first lines aloud (and then forgetting what comes next!). This is the only known recording of Browning's voice. (<https://poetryarchive.org/poem/how-they-brought-good-news-from-ghent-aix-extract/>)

- [A Parody of the Poem](#) — Read a parody of this poem—which became so famous it was often the butt of jokes. (Notice how the parodists pick up on this poem's frequent repetition of the word "galloped"!) (<https://jeremynicholas.com/2013/07/months-parody-july-13-how-brought-good-news-ghent-aix/>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a lively reading of the poem (and get a feel for its galloping onomatopoeia). (<https://youtu.be/2rZ74jEzvyQ>)
- [An Intro to Browning](#) — Read a short introduction to Browning's life and work at the British Library's website. (<https://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/poetryperformance/browning/josephinehart/aboutbrowning.html>)
- [Browning at the Poetry Foundation](#) — Visit the Poetry Foundation to read more of Browning's work. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning>)
- [Browning's Legacy](#) — Read an article about Browning's complex literary legacy. Browning's contemporaries often mocked his poetry, but he's remembered as an important and innovative poet. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/07/robert-browning-bicentenary>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- [Meeting at Night](#)
- [My Last Duchess](#)
- [Porphyria's Lover](#)



HOW TO CITE

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