Engl 503
Prof. Gordon Fulton
Term Paper
Dec. 13 2002

# The Beste Rym I Kan: The Emergence of Rhyme in English

**Baba Brinkman**

**0135748**

When discussing the general significance and tumultuous history of rhyme in the English language, most scholars are conspicuously unable to mask their biases. Explications of the function of rhyme in poetry often incarnate as thinly-veiled crusades for the holy grail of verse theory: a rhetorically sound account of why rhyme holds such enduring sway over human emotions. Some have come commendably close to achieving this peculiar trophy, a prize implicitly synonymous with a catharsis of each critic's own frustrating preoccupation with rhyme. In fact, the overwhelming impression given by these critics is that most serious writing about the phenomenon of rhyme is ultimately motivated by a deeply visceral infatuation with it, and a desire to defend it against post-Miltonic attacks. This often threatens to undermine the integrity of their work, and occasionally becomes the subject of it: "perhaps, too, [rhyme's] tinkle was merely an echo of the brass and cymbals of inept critical praise of its function"(Hollander, 134). Those scholars unaffected (or negatively affected) by poetry's most potent phonetic phenomenon tend to simply gloss it in favour of content-based criticism. With no pretense to greater objectivity or detachment, I propose to revisit the early history of rhyme in English poetry, examining its rapid emergence and eventual displacement of alliteration as the dominant mode of versification during the fourteenth century. This transition occurred over a relatively short period, and although the complex causes behind it have been touched on many times individually, they have yet to be synthesized into a coherent whole.

There are three overlapping veins through which I wish to approach this question of causation. One is historical, relying on internal evidence from surviving OE and ME manuscripts, the fossil record of rhyme's evolution in English verse. These texts reveal

possible sources for rhyme's introduction into English, trends in the ensuing degrees of hybridity between rhyme and alliteration, and most importantly perforations and exceptions to the slow-change model of the transition. The most important single figure in this formal metamorphosis is Geoffrey Chaucer, whose prolific and hugely influential body of writing, mostly rhymed verse, signaled the end of alliteration as a unifying force in English. Another approach is linguistic, looking to changes in the English language after the Norman conquest for evidence of comparative syntactic and lexical receptivity to the use of rhyme. Reciprocally, there is also a sense in which rhyme contributed to the incursion of foreign-derived words into English, since multi-lingual poets like Chaucer and the Gawaine scribe compensated for the scarcity of English rhymes by drawing from alien sources. My third inroad into the roots of rhyme in English is based on what has loosely been called "rhyme theory," the result of extensive twentieth-century scholarship on the subject of rhyme's general function in verse. Although this sort of formal enquiry may not have been available in Chaucer's England, its applications are usually offered as universal, and many concepts developed by rhyme theory can be fruitfully applied to this study. These new developments are specifically relevant to the individual decisions of Chaucer and other poets to use or to not use rhyme, as dictated by their respective audiences, tastes, abilities, and circumstances. In a sense, all questions of versification are reducible to this context.

Since it will have to inform the bulk of my analyses, I will begin with a general discussion of rhyme theory. The significance of rhyme has been approached from virtually every possible angle by scholars of verse, but for simplicity's sake I will accept

John Hollander's division of rhyme theory into four headings, representing increasing spheres of complexity.  These include the mnemonic, schematic, musical, and semantic functions of rhyme.  Each of these aspects of rhyme respectively confers a greater degree of poetic fitness on the device, contributing to its appeal and widespread use.  The mnemonic and schematic functions are predominantly pragmatic, and can be dealt with briefly.  The first refers to the greater facility that rhyme allows in memorization, and the tendency of rhymes to resonate in our minds, even if we don't intend them too.  This is useful both to the performing poet wishing to recite from memory, and also in the transmission of simple information in the form of slogans, jingles, aphorisms, and the like.  The schematic function concerns the use of rhyme as a marker to distinguish stanzas with different patterned rhyme schemes.  These stanzas have come to be associated with distinct genres and themes, creating a wider range of formal options available to the poet.  I submit these two functions of rhyme as pragmatic because their relevance lies more in the past (composition) and the future (mental retention) than in the present (performance) state of verse; mnemonics and schematics must therefore be considered secondary characteristics.

The primary reason for rhyme's existence, according to most rhyme theory, derives from its inherent musical and semantic qualities.  It is only in these two overlapping spheres that great rifts of difference begin to appear between effective and ineffective uses of rhyme.  In *The Physical Basis of Rhyme,* Henry Lanz analyses phonetic graphs produced by regular speech and by rhyming verse, comparing these latter sound charts to those of music.  The musical nature of rhyme, according to Lanz, is responsible for its historical success and resilience: "Physical analysis shows the presence

of musical motion in a series of uttered words. It further shows that only rime, i.e., a return to the original tone, makes the motion actually melodic by furnishing it with a definite center of reference"(199). The pleasure derivable from this melodic or musical quality of rhyme is not contended; what is controversial, however, is the degree to which sound depends on sense for its rhetorical effect. W.K Wimsatt, in *The Verbal Icon*, was one of the first to suggest the correlation between the sonorous and semantic value of rhymes: "the words of a rhyme, with their curious harmony of sound and distinction of sense, are an amalgam of the sensory and the logical, or an arrest and precipitation of the logical in sensory form; they are the icon in which the idea is caught"(W.K. Wimsatt, 165). More recently, James Wimsatt (no relation) has criticized this view, suggesting the two systems operate independently. "To say that sound in a poem has semiotic force, a kind of nondiscursive meaning independent of the verbal sense, is to assert that poetic sound adheres to its own proper values, neither obediently subserving nor being subsumed in verbal sense"(J. Wimsatt, 4). Although J. Wimsatt may be right about the existence of an independent semiotic value for sound, it is virtually impossible to discuss this value meaningfully without any reference to the sense of the words. As W.K. Wimsatt points out, "verses composed of meaningless words afford no pleasure of any kind and can scarcely be called rhythmical--let them even be rhymed"(165).[1]

Rather than attempting vainly to separate the musical and semantic value of rhymes, it is more productive to discuss their interlaced and symbiotic relationship. Lanz describes the extent to which the semantic value of rhymes relies on sound: "Rime produces an artistic effect, not because it invents an empty verbal echo to be mechanically produced between the two rows of words, but because it confronts and

conveys different ideas through the harmony of identical sounds"(164). This harmony compels us to discover semantic links that would otherwise be overlooked, and the power of rhyme is derived from these new links between words: "Combinations of ideas that would probably never occur to us may be easily suggested by a given rime. In arranging his rimes the poet may hit upon new and original ideas. In this sense rimes are creative of new meanings"(Lanz, 166). Lanz's emphasis on "new meaning" echoes the traditional view of "surprise" as the primary pleasure of rhyme, a tension between anticipation and catharsis. This would explain why hackneyed or predictable rhymes have little appeal, since they lack surprise. However, W.K. Wimsatt wisely refuses to accept surprise alone as the deciding factor:

> The greater the difference in meaning between rhyme words the more marked and the more appropriate will be the binding effect. Rhyme theorists have spoken of the "surprise" which is the pleasure of rhyme, and surely this surprise is not merely a matter of coming upon a similarity which one has not *previously* anticipated. It cannot be a matter of time. Even after the discovery, when the rhyme is known by heart, the pleasurable surprise remains. It must depend on some incongruity or unlikelihood inherent in the coupling. (164, Wimsatt's emphasis)

Instead of a surprise that emerges only once and is spent, enduring rhymes somehow capture and enshrine the essence of a new semantic link, so that it can repeat its emergence indefinitely. This suggests it is the creative reach of the poet at the moment of composition that determines the difference between successful and unsuccessful rhyme.

The standard complaint against rhyme is that it constrains and oppresses the motions of verse, or that "its demands are likely to turn the poet aside from the normal order of his ideas"(Alden, 122). It is this same constraint, however, that also potentially captures something valuable:

> The bridging, associating, linking function of rhyme is a dialectical turn upon its ability to handcuff. Rhyme links syllables, and thereby words, and thereby lines, and thereby

> larger versified structures, and at each level of linkage, it performs another sort of "musical" or "rhetorical" work. (Hollander, 119)

Arthur Melville Clark's metaphor of buoyancy and resistance clearly articulates this relationship, answering the difficulty inherent in versification with reference to the potential rewards:

> It is a mistake, too, to regard the resistances offered either by the poet's medium or by his chosen form only as obstacles and not also as supports. They are indeed like the water through which a swimmer has to force his way, but which at the same time buoys him up and without which he could not swim at all. (173)

As we shall see, the challenges faced by poets intent on writing under formal constraint tend to fluctuate erratically in response to historical, linguistic, and social contexts, leading to various degrees of buoyancy and ballast in their work.

It has been shown convincingly by Henry Lanz that serious attempts to trace rhyme to its ultimate origin using textual evidence will inevitably be met with failure.[2] Several attempts have been made, (one of the most thorough being Lanz's own), and these suggest several degrees of antiquity for the genesis of rhyme, but no conclusion can come of this approach:

> We cannot lay hand on one particular literary document and say: here is the origin of rime. We cannot even trace the early paths of rime within any particular literature we know. It has been justly remarked that rime lies so deep in human nature and in human language that it is as little worth while to discuss the origin of rime as that of dancing or singing. (Lanz, 106)

Here Lanz is reaching much farther back than is necessary for this enquiry, however, and it will suffice for us to accept that rhyme is much older than the English language, and that the native verse form was alliteration, and not rhyme. The versification of OE is described by William Harmon as follows: "alliteratively unified, four-beat lines with a heavy reliance on designs that could match the two-by-two verse line: parallelism,

apposition, epithets, repetition, parataxis, and so forth"(Harmon, 14). Rhymes occurred occasionally in pre-conquest English verse, but seem for the most part to have been avoided.

The process by which rhymes first entered English has been the source of exhaustive debate. The traditional view, represented by Schipper in *A History of English Versification,* has been to view rhymed Latin hymns as the culprit, positing Christian influence as the reason for rhyme's spread: "It's adoption into all modern literature is due to the extensive use made of it in the hymns of the Church"(12). Certainly rhymed Latin hymns did exist in medieval England, but with one conspicuous exception rhyme seems not to have been taken up by Anglo-Saxon poets, despite the presence of Latin examples, as well as others. Raymond Alden looks to French as well as Latin sources:

> End-rime being a stranger to the early Germanic languages, its appearance in any of them may commonly be taken as a sign of foreign influence. In general, of course, rime and the stanza were introduced together into English verse, under the influence of Latin hymns and French lyrics. (Alden, 121)

Lanz offers two other possibilities into the debate:

> Latin may have been one of the channels through which rime penetrated into English poetry, but it was by no means the only one. French, no doubt, was another channel. Celtic Welsh, according to Guest, constitutes still another probability. Finally, the process of spontaneous generation is not at all excluded. (Lanz, 125)

These approaches, however, rely on a "whodunnit" model of verse change, supposing rhyme to be so virulent that once it infects a country's literature there is no stopping it, and literary historians need only identify a carrier to find their cause. Even allowing for the possibility of spontaneous generation, as Lanz suggests, the evidence is strongly against this view of rhyme, at least without further qualification.

One early outbreak that warrants attention is the "Old English Riming Poem," which appears in the Exeter Book, circa 900. This is the most conspicuous

counterexample to the overall consistency of Anglo-Saxon versification. The "Riming Poem" follows the same four-stress alliterative *aa ax* pattern as other OE verse, but also includes end-rhymes terminating each line, and internal rhymes preceding each caesura. For this reason, the poem has been widely censured for sacrificing sense in service of sound.[3] It is an early example of alliterative/rhyme hybrid poetry, which would become much more common after the conquest; however, since it is usually dated in the tenth century, the "Riming Poem" may represent the closest thing to spontaneous generation of rhyme in English. It certainly had no *English* precedents, though what is most interesting about the poem's form is not that it rhymes, but that it rhymes *so much*. Two lines will suffice to convey this peculiarity: "Lisse lengdon   lustum glengdon / Scrifen scrad glad Þurh gescad in brad"(14). The density of rhyme and lack of analogues suggests an idiosyncratic and experimental temperament on the poet's part,[4] though presumably a creative mind need only encounter a single rhyme to develop such a form. This is also noted by the poem's most recent editor: "a basis for experiment in adding rhyme to vernacular poetry was obviously present, and a work like *Riming Poem* could obviously be developed" (Macrae-Gibson, 25). Where the poet got the *idea* to rhyme is irrelevant; what is important is the manifest accessibility of rhyme to early poets of the English language, demonstrating that the form could be used, even excessively. This suggests that the virtual absence of rhyme in Anglo Saxon verse is attributable to something other than unfamiliarity. Pearsall's account of early rhyme in *Old English and Middle English Poetry* follows this logic as well:

> Rhyme was always known in Anglo-Saxon times, since the rhymed Latin accentual hymns were very familiar from the sixth century onwards: rhyming phrases appear in the charms and in some of the laws…as well as sporadically in all Anglo-Saxon poetry. On this interpretation, it was the normal concern of Anglo-Saxon poets to *avoid* rhyme,

> perhaps because they considered it popular, perhaps because they considered it rhythmically subversive. (72, original emphasis)

To augment speculation over the reason for rhyme's absence from most Anglo-Saxon verse, we must turn to the contribution of linguistics.

William Harmon's vast and ambitious essay, "English Versification: Fifteen Hundred Years of Continuity and Change" offers a new and compelling explanation for the origin of rhyme in English:

> The enduring dominance of the iamb, as well as the emergence of rhyme as a unifying expressive and mnemonic device, can be accounted for by reference to a single linguistic principle: Indo-European language tend to change from one morphological disposition to another. They change, that is, from a state of being sythetic-suffixal toward a state of being analytic-prefixal. (15)

This may be a slight overstatement, since no linguistic principle alone can account for such a complex phenomenon as rhyme; nevertheless, Harmon has identified an important factor in rhyme's suitability to various languages. This argument is based on the observation that inflected or "synthetic-suffixal" languages like OE are poorly disposed to rhyme because, "the overwhelming majority of rhymes will be either multiple, with one or more unstressed syllables succeeding the truly rhyming syllable, or just homeoteleuton"(Harmon, 27). "Homeoteleuton" is a phenomenon first identified by Aristotle, referring to rhymes based on common suffixes, which tend to be unstressed. Since the musical value of rhyme is based on *stress* -- cleverly illustrated by Harmon with the non-rhymes "Charlton" and "Heston" -- as opposed to common endings alone, languages with more unstressed suffixes will be more prone to "reject rhyme"(27).[5] In addition to the lack of musicality in unstressed suffixal rhymes, there is also a lack of semantic difference, identified by Wimsatt as crucial to the function of rhyme: "the

greater the difference in meaning between rhyme words the more marked and the more appropriate will be the binding effect"(W.K. Wimsatt, 164). Homeoteleuton offers the least possible semantic difference, with the exception of identical rhyme, since common suffixes usually signify common inflections.

By this reckoning, the changes in the English language following the Norman conquest drastically increased its receptivity to the use of rhyme:

> Much of this new resource has to do with the establishment of English as an ever more analytic-prefixal language with plenty of materials for patterning in the dynamic iambic rhythm along with plenty of stressed monosyllables and other configurations that invite the free use of agreeable rhyme. (Harmon, 25)

Rhyme was thus enabled by the blending of English with Anglo-Norman, which produced a greater variation in the degree of stress each word could possess: "The eventual synthesis is verse in a language with syllables that can be contrasted binarily as strong or weak, or else in some more complex way that takes account of the three of four levels of stress audible in spoken English"(Harmon, 15). Middle English combined the stress patterns of OE and Anglo-Norman with a new lexicon of imported words and a much less inflected native lexicon to allow for greater musical and semantic variation in rhyme possibilities. Middle English, and indeed English in general, is in many ways a language better suited to rhyme, according to the principles of rhyme theory, than most others:

> Partly because of the hybrid origin of English and partly because of their multiform shapes, our words, especially the Anglo-Saxon ones which form the core and to a large extent the substance of our poetic diction, have a much greater variety of terminations than have the vocabularies of less mixed and more uniform languages. (Clark, 186)

Once rhyme began to take hold, its advance was relatively constant, first blending with alliteration, then competing as a distinct form, and eventually dominating. Donald Wesling describes the intermediate period of flux as:

> A moment of paradigm crisis and uncertainty. A poetic device fostered by the church in its hymns, and brought from France, is gaining influence over a strictly indigenous related device. For a time the two overlap, until the insurgent device takes over. The coexistence is also a form of debate, though never aggressively argued. Indeed so cordial are the relations between the differing prosodies, that on occasion they are employed in the same poem. (45)

The relationship between alliteration and rhyme during this period does not appear to have been antagonistic, and if there was heated debate, little evidence of it remains. Our modern sense of rhyme's inherent contentiousness, conditioned by centuries of attacks and defenses, may not be directly applicable to the early uses of rhyme in English, during a time when "there were no treatises on English verse"(Woods, 21).[6]

Ironically, rhyme was not only enabled by the changes occurring in ME, apparently it also actively contributed to those changes. In a survey of the etymological roots of various words used in the fourteenth century poem, "Pearl," James Windsatt discovered a correlation between the poet's word choice and the relative value of the word in the poem's complex prosody. Like the "Riming Poem," "Pearl" combines alliteration with end-rhyme, although it mercifully does not attempt internal rhyme as well. Nevertheless, the strenuous demands of the verse form often caused the poet to search outside of his native lexicon, causing a greater proportion of foreign-derived words to be used both in rhymes and alliteration:

> A summary comparison of the various charts above indicates that as the requirements of the prosody increase, so does the proportion of words of non-English etymology increase. We may hypothesize that the stressed words in Pearl that involve no rhyme, neither alliteration nor end-rhyme, represent the most natural word choice of the poet. Alliteration (initial rhyme), involving a single sound, requires a somewhat larger exertion of artistry. And end-rhyme, consisting of a sequence of vowels and consonants, requires still more. Consequently, the use of both French and Norse words increases as the artistic requirements increase. (J. Wimsatt, 14)

The implications would be extensive if this were proven to be the predominant trend in rhymed ME verse, (as I suspect it would). By this reckoning, the speed of rhyme's uptake

in English might have partially been the result of a self-perpetuating linguistic cycle, or positive feedback loop, where changes in the language promoted the use of rhyme, and the demands of rhyme caused more and more words to be imported, further changing the language.  This would have continued roughly until written standardization was achieved.

When Chaucer began writing poetry around the mid-fourteenth century, rhyme had been present in England in some form for almost a millennium, and had been widely used in English verse for over two hundred years.  Harmon characteristically overstates when he situates Chaucer at the apex of linguistic changes in English: "Chaucer was among the first major English poets in a position to take advantage of two relatively new possibilities of versification: iambic rhythm and masculine rhyme"(17).  Certainly there were many poets before Chaucer whose positioning was equally good; however, as far as we know, Chaucer *was* the first poet ready willing and able to take full advantage of the potential of rhyme in English.  Strangely enough, not much has been said about Chaucer's decision to use rhyme instead of alliteration as his preferred verse form, probably because it seems like a foregone conclusion in the context of his great success with rhyme. However, "end rhyme was but one of several possibilities when Chaucer had just begun writing"(Wesling, 44).  The alliterative revival of the fourteenth century had strongly reasserted the potential of the alliterative long line for narrative verse.  Any cursory read of a stanza of *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight* followed by a stanza from one of the metrical romances would effectively advertise the inferiority of rhyme for narrative purposes:

> The short couplet, the tail-rhyme stanza, the septenary/alexandrine - lacked the strength, elevation and versatility of alliterative verse, and it was only when Chaucer introduced

> anglicized versions of European poetic forms that the commanding heights of metropolitan and court culture were finally annexed. (Pearsall, 45)

In light of the available models Chaucer was faced with, his decision to use rhyme, like his decision to use English, must be seen as somewhat visionary.

There is some internal evidence in Chaucer's poetry regarding his views on verse form. He uses alliteration notably for the tournament in the *Knight's Tale*, drawing on the clamour of clashing consonants to represent the sounds of battle: "He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan threste; / Ther stomblen steedes stronge, and doun gooth al"(I (A) 2612). Here Chaucer is paying tribute to the most resilient feature of alliteration, its aptitude for describing violence. The Parson explicitly contrasts alliteration and rhyme in the prologue to his tale: "I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf' by lettre / Ne, God woot, rym holde I but litel bettre"(X 42). The formal hierarchy suggested here is confused somewhat by the use of different verbs, the first regarding comprehension, and the second esteem. "Geeste," or alliteration, is rejected because the parson doesn't know how to use it, but rhyme is rejected because of how he "holdes" it. What is suggested, perhaps, is the withdrawal of alliteration from the national, or at least the southern, sphere of formal debate, ceding to rhyme, which is then held in variable esteem compared to prose.

This formal hierarchy is also suggested in the *Thopas/Melibee* link, after Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* mock-romance has been interrupted. The Host instructs Chaucer to choose another form, having proven himself unworthy of rhyme: "Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme. / Lat se wher thou kanst tellen aught in geeste, / Or telle in prose somwhat, at the leest"(VII 932). These few short lines effectively dramatize and condense the entire formal debate in England at the time. The couplets themselves

represent the highest form, drawing no unwarranted attention, while deftly executing the bulk of Chaucer's narrative practice. The sort of rhyming the narrator is barred from, the octosyllabic tale-rhyme romance style, resembles the previously dominant rhyme form in English, which Chaucer therefore had to define himself against. Of the options offered in default of rhyme, the first is "geeste," or alliteration, which was already archaic yet still held in some esteem, soon to fade. The option Chaucer accepts for his second tale, prose, is valued "at the leeste," since it represents complete forfeiture of formalized expression.

David Burnley provides us with some insight into the external equivalent of the tensions dramatized internally in the *Thopas/Melibee* link:

> The perennial struggle of the poet with his language is that of manipulating language so that he can, at one and the same time, communicate his complex meanings (without too many inappropriate ones) to an audience, whilst still observing the formal and metrical constraints he has voluntarily placed upon himself by his decision to write in verse. (117)

Chaucer's rhyming practice reveals a marked divergence from that of his predecessors, signaling a refusal to succumb to the weight of his metrical constraints. Burnley surveys Chaucer's rhymes for the word "knight," comparing them to the rhymes found in two early London romances, *Kyng Alisaunder* and *Arthur and Merlin*. This survey reveals five rhymes Chaucer shared with both poems, six shared with one or the other exclusively, and six rhymes not found in either romance. The one conspicuous omission from Chaucer's work is the most common rhyme in the romance tradition, and the most obvious semantic pairing: "fight." This prompts Burnley to speculate: "Although its omission may be in part dependent upon Chaucer's subject matter, one is nevertheless tempted to assume that its complete absence may own something to his perception of it as a hackneyed rhyme"(131). Since Chaucer often writes of knights getting in fights, there

is little chance that this omission can be attributed to subject matter. Chaucer may have been the first English poet to pay any mind to the avoidance of hackneyed rhyme, both in his practice and explicitly in his poetry. Indeed, the word "doggerel" is a Chaucerian coinage, appearing for the first time in the English language during the Host's tirade over *Sir Thopas*: "'Now swich a rym the devel I biteche! / This may wel be rym dogerel,' quod he"(VII 924).[7] We may, in fact, owe the very *concept* of dogerel to Chaucer, since he was evidently the first to explicitly identify it as a pitfall of rhyme, and managed to crystallize it so vividly in the *Thopas/Melibee* link. Burnley rightly attributes Chaucer's doggerel sensibility to an awareness of audience: "Although he was often content to employ familiar and tradition rhymes, there is also evidence of resourcefulness in seeking unusual rhymes, as well as of avoiding rhymes which might have proved unacceptable to his audience"(131).

Two other aspects of Chaucer's rhyming practice are noteworthy in this context. One is his aversion to ending every clause with a rhyme, which adds to the fluidity of his narrative style and varies the syntactic location of rhymes, which is a form of Wimsatt's semantic difference. Susanne Woods points out the contrast between Chaucer's work and that of his predecessors in this respect:

> Typically, Chaucer ends his tumultuous action, and the sentence, in the middle of a couplet. This structural linking of one section to another and downplay of rime as a formal device is also characteristic of *The Canterbury Tales* and, to a lesser extent (given the stanzaic structure involved), of *Troilus and Criseyde*. It contributes to Chaucer's dynamic narrative style, as opposed to the more static lyric styles of the Provencal poets, whose *coblas* were to coincide perfectly with units of thought or narrative. (Woods, 36)

The other peculiarity of Chaucer's rhyming practice is his tendency to play occasionally with polysyllabic rhymes and internal rhymes not attributable to homeoteleuton. One

notable example of chiastic internal rhyme occurs in the "Miller's Tale": "For curteisie, he sayde, he wolde noon. / The moone, whan it was nyght, ful brighte shoon,"(I (A) 3351). Examples of polysyllabic end-rhyme occur in the "Knight's Tale": "Swownynge, and baar hire fro the corps away. / What helpeth it to tarien forth the day,"(I (A) 2819) and the "Franklin's Tale": "And with my deth I may be quyt, ywis. / Hath ther nat many a noble wyf er this,"(V (F) 1363).[8] These occasional phonetic flourishes reveal a subtle savvy in Chaucer about the nature of rhyme and its need to be continuously refreshed.

Chaucer's rhyming practice and his dramatization of different forms in *The Canterbury Tales* offers compelling evidence that he understood the principles of rhyme theory very well, and applied that understanding in his creative process to ensure the success of his work. The four basic functions of rhyme as defined by twentieth century rhyme theorists, though often complexly articulated, would not be terribly difficult for a keen mind to intuit under prolonged exposure to rhyme in its various forms. The differences between doggerel and excellent verse emerge most clearly from simple observation of the reactions of an audience to performance. Chaucer's mastery of rhyme as a formal device was instrumental in his later influence: "When a poet rhymes well, he has mastered his medium thoroughly. The result is as if he had *invented* a language which has rhyme as one of its natural characteristics and which by an unforeseen luck turns out to be intelligible to his readers"(Clark, 176 - original emphasis). This is true of no one so much as Chaucer, whose critically appointed role as originator of both the English language as we know it and the ensuing tradition of English poetry carries along with it the honourary title of originator of rhyme. None of these titles is absolute in its accuracy, but neither are there any serious contenders threatening to dethrone him.

I have focussed on the emergence of rhyme before Chaucer simply because after his death rhyme was finally established as the dominant form in English for centuries, eradicating competing forms through the prestige and influence of Chaucer and his imitators.[9] The emergence of rhyme in Middle English can therefore be described in the same terms as the emergence of English itself as the language of court: "Chaucer's poetry, in its bulk and quality, is the main evidence for this change, the main product of it, and perhaps even its major precipitant"(Pearsall, 190). Unfortunately, the prestige of rhyme was subsequently undermined by the persistent ineptitude of succeeding poets unable to do it justice, and it eventually gave up its crown to free verse. The story of rhyme in English *after* Chaucer, however, has been told many times by more able scholars than myself.

---

[1] The difficulty raised by this generalization is the undeniable pleasure derivable from listening to poetry in an unknown foreign language, which does have sense, though we cannot decipher it. The question for experiment would be, how would our pleasure be effected if we were told that the poetry was put on, composed of gibberish words made to sound like foreign speech? I suspect most listeners would be put off by this information.

[2] The most obvious explanation for this, which Lanz fails to offer, is that the first written rhymes merely represent oral transactions, and it was certainly in oral poetry that rhyme originated.

[3] See Macrae-Gibson p. 12

[4] The "Riming Poem" composer could be likened, perhaps, to an Anglo-Saxon John Skelton, struck by the same fascination with rhyme as many of the theorists I refer to.

[5] Also implied but not explicitly stated by this argument is the unsuitability of prefixes for alliteration. Since alliteration uses correlating sounds at the *beginning* of words, prefixes presumably would be as disfunctional in alliteration as suffixes are in rhyme, which correlates the ends of words.

[6] Wesling comes close to contradicting himself when he generalizes: "There is no time in the history of rhyme when this device was not a matter of contention, whether in practice or in prosodic theory. There are conflicting poetic of rhyming and rhymelessness, or of one type of rhyming as against another"(40). In the case of ME, however, the contention took the subtler form of poetic practice.

[7] Commendations to Alan Gaylord for pointing this out.

[8] This phenomenon has not been noted yet by scholarship, as far as I know.

[9] The significance of rhyme in English verse immediately after Chaucer is somewhat overestimated by Clark:

> Not only does rhyme steady the average listener and clarify his metrical sense, but on one occasion at least it saved our poetry. In the century and a half between the death of Chaucer and the publication of *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) there had been a time of prosodic welter when the verse-makers were mumbling something between decayed Middle English and immature Modern English. In that transitional period it was rhyme which kept the tradition of poetry from utter extinction, and it was from the support of rhyme that the new poetry recovered its step. (183)

## Works Cited:


Alden, Raymond Macdonald. *English Verse: Specimens Illustrating its Principles and History*. AMS Press. New York, NY. 1970.

Benson, Larry D. (gen. ed.) *The Riverside Chaucer*. The Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, Mass. 1987

Burnley, David. *A Guide to Chaucer's Language*. Macmillan Press Ltd. 1983.

Clark, Arthur Melville. *Studies in Literary Modes*. Oliver and Boyd. London, UK. 1946

Harmon, William. "English Versification: Fifteen-Hundred Years of Continuity and Change" *Studies in Philology*. (Chapel Hill, NC) (94:1) [Winter 1997] pp1-37

Hollander, John. *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*. Oxford University

Press. New York, NY. 1975.

Lanz, Henry. *The Physical Basis of Rime*. Greenwood Press. New York, NY. 1968.

Macrae-Gibson, O.D. ed. *The Old English Riming Poem*. D.S. Brewer Press. Cambridge, UK. 1983.

Pearsall, Derek. *Old English and Middle English Poetry*. Routleddge & Kegan Paul Ltd. London, UK. 1977.

Pearsall, Derek. "The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds" in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background*. David Lawton, ed. St. Edmundsbury Press. Suffolk, UK. 1982.

Pearsall, Derek. "The Origins of the Alliterative Revival" in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*. Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach eds. Kent State University Press. Kent, Ohio. 1981.

Saintsbury, George. *Historical Manual of English Prosody*. Macmillan and Co. London, UK. 1930.

Schipper, Jakob. *A Historyof English Versification*. AMS Press. New York, N.Y. 1910.

Wesling, Donald. *The Chances of Rhyme: Device and Modernity*. University of California Press. 1980.

Wimsatt, James I. "Rhyme, The Icons of Sound, and the Middle English *Pearl*" *Style*. Summer 96. Vol. 30 Issue 2, p189.

Wimsatt, W.K. *The Verbal Icon*. University of Kentucky Press. 1954.

Woods, Susanne. *Natural Emphasis: English Versification from Chaucer to Dryden*. Huntington Library Press. San Marino. 1984.