

Honours Thesis  
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## **Competitive Poetics**

*An Examination of Speaker/Audience Relationships in Hip-hop  
Lyrics and The Canterbury Tales*

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If men shal telle proprely a thyng,  
The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng. (209)  
-Geoffrey Chaucer, The Manciple's Tale

When comparing two texts in an English Literature paper, it is commonplace to first discuss the obvious differences, then demonstrate the similarities and parallels one has observed, and finally to talk about the common influences that have caused such similarities to arise. The texts I have chosen, however, may not be entirely conducive to this process. The poetry produced by Geoffrey Chaucer in late fourteenth-century England and the lyrics produced by Hip-hop artists today are as widely separated as virtually any two texts in English<sup>1</sup>. Any similarities I discuss will therefore inevitably be obscured by more obvious contradictions. Generic, cultural, racial, temporal, economic, geographic, literary, oral, textual, and political differences confuse and complicate the poetic correlation I intend to illustrate. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to attribute this correlation to common influences, save perhaps those applying to all poetry produced in a highly competitive atmosphere, written for oral performance, and judged according to some definable poetic standard, such as skilled rhyme, regular meter, intelligent content, and entertainment value. The near isolation of these texts from common social or cultural influences complicates things immensely, yet it also allows me to talk about similarities in poetic technique and structure without the baggage of having to identify any tangible shared origin. This was, of course, the desired effect in choosing these texts, yet it has also resulted in a paper that is both culturally and academically unorthodox, and is bound to be met with skepticism and even some hostility. Hip-hop purists will likely object to the association of a primarily African-American art form with the poetry of a medieval Englishman. Academic purists may object to a comparison between their beloved

Chaucer, the “father of English poetry,” and the lyrics of a few ghetto-born urban-American rappers. I will therefore proceed only with the understanding that I mean no disrespect to anyone, and hope to both elevate Hiphop lyrics from their status as merely a “popular” form, while at the same time reconnecting Chaucer’s poetry with its roots in popular styles and orality. Neither side, I would argue, has anything to lose from this partnership.

I intend to compare the fictional speakers in The Canterbury Tales, by Geoffrey Chaucer, with the semi-fictional speakers found in Hiphop lyrics. The interdependency of the speaker and audience represented in both Chaucer’s fictional frame narrative and in recorded Hiphop is the basic foundation of my argument, since I have found the most distinct parallels in this relationship. The fictional interactions between different voices in both texts symbolize actual oral transactions rendered in a competitive framework, with remarkably similar poetic standards of judgement. To make this comparison, I propose to begin with a discussion of the Hiphop genre, focussing specifically on aspects that reflect poetic and structural dynamics similar to those in Chaucer’s poetry. The areas of Hiphop revealing the most concrete parallels are its inherent orality, its permeating atmosphere of competition, specifically regarding the poetic skill of the speaker, its constant recycling of previous themes and materials, and finally its extreme self-referentiality. Once a clear understanding of the relevant facets of Hiphop has been established I will apply these concepts to the frame narrative of The Canterbury Tales. This discussion will focus specifically on “The Tale of Sir Thopas,” which represents the height of Chaucer’s ironic self-parody. “Sir Thopas,” and especially the surrounding dialogue, presents us with a scene that is highly oral, strongly competitive with regard to the speaker’s poetic skill,

adapts and parodies previous narratives and conventions, and is Chaucer's most blatantly self-reflexive verse in the text.

I'm breakin' the laws of physics with metaphors and lyrics,  
Speakin' to dead poets by conjuring up their spirits  
From Shakespeare to Edgar Allen,  
The whole dead poet society couldn't mess around with the talent  
Much less understand it.  
I make tight rope walkers with the circus lose their balance  
When I kick the planet.  
-Canibus freestyle<sup>2</sup>

Hiphop music, a contemporary Urban-American form approximately twenty-five years old, and Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, an elaborate text written in Middle-English over six-hundred years ago, must seem at first an unlikely combination. Hiphop is above all a genre originated and dominated by African-Americans. My research has revealed comparisons between Hiphop and other contemporary American and traditional African poetic forms, but barely any criticism linking Hiphop poetics with those of the English literary tradition.<sup>3</sup> Hiphop critics most often trace the genre's precursors through black music and African myth, grounding its roots in the history of black people, and positing Hiphop as the latest in a long line of black poetic and musical expression. Most of these connections have already received critical attention, but David Toop provides us with a useful overview:

Rap's forebears stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmear Markham, the tap dancers and the comics, The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Muhammad Ali, a cappella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-rope rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way back to the griots of Nigeria and Gambia. (Toop 19)

As one black poet and academic I spoke with pointed out, "the originators of Hiphop were more into Parliament Funkadelic than they were into 'The Parliament of Fowls.'"<sup>4</sup> This is

just a clever way of saying that Parliament Funkadelic, referred to above as “street funk,” was definitely influential in Hiphop’s formative years, whereas rap’s pioneers were no doubt unfamiliar with Chaucer’s poem, “The Parliament of Fowls.” Thus if I were tracing Hiphop’s origins, rather than examining its poetics, Chaucer would be totally irrelevant.

Suffice to say, English Literature did not play a vital role, if any, in the founding of Hiphop. Though the cultures represented by Hiphop and Chaucer may have little in common, one definite connection does exist; on a very basic level, Hiphop lyrics are a form of poetry in English, usually working with (or against) the same structures of rhyme and rhythm used for centuries by English poets. Also, Hiphop’s tendency to borrow from other texts and genres leads to the recirculation of material, a process that causes Hiphop lyrics to intermix with other poetic genres. English poetry may not have been influential in the first expressions of Hiphop, yet the lyrics gradually began to incorporate themes and narratives from this tradition as the genre diversified.<sup>5</sup> What criteria these lyrics must meet to be considered literary poetry is of less concern to my discussion than the basic poetic form they take, i.e. consistent rhyme and rhythm, and the thematic content they express. Today the criteria defining poetry is nearly as complicated as the criteria defining literature, but in Chaucer’s world things were simpler; poetry was rhymed and metered, while prose was not. Hiphop lyrics, were they heard in fourteenth century England, would probably have been recognized as a form of poetry, bizarre and perhaps unrefined, but verse nonetheless. Likewise, if a few lines of Chaucer were slipped into a Hiphop track, they would function the same way as other lyrics, sounding a bit out of place, but easily meeting the demands of rhyme and rhythm Hiphop has established. More importantly, both texts represent inherently self-referential forms of poetry. Hiphop artists rap about

writing rhymes and rapping just as Chaucer writes poetry about writing and reciting poetry. In spite of the centuries separating them, two poetic forms with such similar structural and thematic characteristics effectively lend themselves to comparison.

Black soldier: "Haven't you heard of the emancipation proclamation?"  
White general: "I don't listen to Hiphop."  
-The Southpark Movie

The poetics of Hiphop have so far been overshadowed by politics, at least in the majority of criticism published. Hiphop has been studied mostly in the social and cultural fields, in the context of black cultural production. It has also been a vital outlet for racial tension, both for the black artists frustrated by their oppression in white culture, and the white artists frustrated by their exclusion from the genre. This later phenomenon represents a more trivial and ironic form of oppression, yet it exposes the complexity and multi-layered nature of race relations in Hiphop:

If white-boy's doin' it well, it's "success;"  
If I start doin' it well it's "suspect."  
Don't hate me, my folks is poor, just got money,  
America's five centuries deep in cotton money,  
You see a lot of brothers caked-up, yo, straight up,  
It's new, ya'll livin' off a slave trader's paper. (Mos Def)<sup>6</sup>

Some people only see that I'm white, ignorin' skill  
'Cause I stand out like a green hat with an orange bill  
But I don't get pissed; Ya'll don't even see through the mist  
How the fuck can I be white? I don't even exist. (Eminem)<sup>7</sup>

Much of Hiphop criticism and theory deals with the black/white relationships it both reflects and dictates, within the lyrics and without. Perhaps the only consensus among these critics is the sentiment that questions of race are central to Hiphop music. "One thing is certain: it's impossible to consider and understand hip-hop outside the context of race; the music remains so inextricably linked with black culture that it is nearly

impossible to separate them”(Ehrlich 13). It would therefore be impossible for me to circumvent these issues as well. Questions of race and politics, however, do not undermine my argument. It is true that I am comparing black poetry with white poetry, yet the two are poetically connected by a common language and use common terminology when referring self-reflexively to their own poetics.

I would argue that most of the differences between Chaucer and Hip-hop are political while most of the similarities are poetic. According to M.A. Neal, “digitized recordings of hip-hop theoretically served to distribute the critical narratives of an isolated working class and underclass youth culture across the dis-jointed African American diaspora via the marketplace.”(Neal 160) Neal’s theory of Hip-hop music emphasizes its role in black culture, a context from which it cannot be removed. Comparing Neal’s “black critical narratives” with those of medieval English culture, however, is not my intention. My comparison is primarily based on poetics and speaker/audience correlation in the narrative frameworks, rather than cultural or political questions. When considering Hip-hop in Neal’s context, the medium is less important than the message and its impact, i.e. by his description Hip-hop music might as well have been prose fiction. This may clarify the distinction between the focuses of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, since the area of Hip-hop Neal disregards is exactly the basis of my argument.

DJs continually extend the music into other genres. Investigating jazz, soul, R&B, blues, salsa and country they cross into new cultural territories and histories. In return people all over the globe insert themselves into hip-hop hybrids, changing the genealogy of the music and further expanding the range of the practice. (18)

- Brian Cross, IT’S NOT ABOUT A SALARY...

In order to provide some contextual background for my comparison, I will include a brief discussion of Hiphop music as a genre; this is intended to convey a sense of the complexity surrounding Hiphop lyrics, which are only one element of an art form notorious for evading generic distinctions. Like many popular and literary genres, Hiphop is both a medium and a message, at the same time music and poetry, able to incite its listeners to dance as compellingly as it makes them think. Artists have used it as a medium for political debate, social commentary, and racial outrage, while others have turned it into parody, joking and making fun of themselves and their audiences. The most effective artists manage to combine the two approaches to find a balance. Debates have raged over these divisions in the genre, fueled by both the artists themselves and by the critics writing in response to the lyrics. Critics and artists have split Hiphop into various sub-genres to accommodate these debates, and various offspring include Message Rap, Pop Rap, Gangsta Rap (or G-funk), East Coast and West Coast styles, Latin Rap, Underground, Mainstream, Afro-centric Rap and cross-over Rap with numerous other established musical and poetic genres. There is still considerable blurring among these genres, and even the most rigid classifications tend to break down under scrutiny. Some critics have attempted to define the genre by reducing it to its basics, filtering out internal divisions to settle on characteristics that seem consistent. Mark Costello takes this approach in Signifying Rappers, and includes the following definitive traits:

- a) No melody besides canonized fragments w/o progression...
- b) A driving, oh-so-danceable 4/4-cut-time... a pyramidal rhythms-within-rhythms structure...
- c) Lyrics that are spoken or yelled, often rhymed or assonant, but always metered, complicating and complementing the marriage of back-bass, scratches, and drums...
- d) A consistency in its deployment of maybe a half a dozen themes... and

e) An overall esthetic that mainstream pop critics and performers... scorn as shallow, materialistic and self referential.  
(Costello 82)

In the ten years since this book was published Hiphop has diversified considerably, and few of these traits can still accurately be applied to all Hiphop music, the exception perhaps being the 4/4 rhythm, which in my experience does appear to dominate.

Costello's observation that Hiphop is built on "canonized fragments" or samples of previously recorded music remains generally true as well, although original instrumentals and percussion are becoming more and more acceptable. Some groups, such as the Philadelphia-based ensemble, The Roots, perform shows with lyrics recited over live music and drums. Fifteen years ago, however, Hiphop was almost devoid of new musical notes: "serious 80s rap is the first 'music' composed entirely of notes created and performed, copyrighted and peddled, by precursors"(Costello 85). Despite the recent influx of original music in the genre, the use of samples still remains one of Hiphop's trademarks, an element that ensures the novelty and diversity of the genre, since any previous recording is the potential raw material for a new song. The lyrics, usually both rhymed and rhythmic, now deploy about as many themes as any poetic medium, since the number of prominent and aspiring artists has grown exponentially in the last ten years, and the sheer volume of lyrics written and produced is now immense.<sup>8</sup> Even with this expansion, the belief is still widespread that the esthetic of Hiphop remains shallow, self-referential and materialistic. Now, however, this criticism comes from within the genre as much as from without and many artists direct the focus of their lyrics at the ignorance and materialism of their peers.

Lost generation, fast paced nation,  
World population confront their frustration,  
The principles of true Hiphop have been forsaken,  
It's all contractual and about money makin',  
Pretend-to-be cats don't seem to know their limitations,  
Exact replication and false representation.  
You wanna be a man, then stand ya own,  
To MC requires skills, I demand some shown.  
-Black Thought of The Roots<sup>9</sup>

For the sake of simplicity I will use this definition: Hiphop includes a rhythmic percussion line, music that is either original or sampled, with lyrics of varied thematic content, delivered in a wide range of individual verbal styles conforming to the rhythm. The most integral and basic form of expression for Hiphop lyrics is the freestyle battle. Freestyling is any rhyming that is completely spontaneous and unrehearsed, existing in contrast to those rhymes that are written, memorized, and then recited. Battling is where two or more lyricists enter into a rhyme competition, promoting their own lyrical skills while belittling those of their competitors. The two terms are not inseparable, and neither are they exclusive, since battles can have both freestyle and also memorized rhymes, and freestyling can be either demonstrative or competitive, depending on the situation. The importance of live freestyling and battling is that in both cases the audience, whether it is a crowd of spectators or merely the listening participants, determines the ability of the lyricist through active response. If the lyrics fit the rhythm well and the rhymes are fresh, original, entertaining, and edifying, then the lyricist will be cheered. If the rhymes lack content, are awkward, cliched, or boring, the speaker will not last long. This direct connection exists only with live events, of course, but recorded lyrics usually incorporate the conventions of the freestyle battle, using similar language, and emphasizing the themes of intense competition and lyrical ability. The response of consumers to a

recorded CD subsequently reflects the same speaker/audience dynamic, although indirectly. The relationship in this case is far more complex because so many other factors may compel people to buy CDs, such as production quality, promotion, or simple curiosity. In the case of live performances, however, the audience and speaker enter into a directly interactive relationship. The audience will listen, and provide encouragement, so long as the lyricist can prove he deserves it. The arts of freestyling and battling therefore represent the very foundation of Hip-hop music, since virtually every lyricist who achieves commercial success must first undergo the trial of countless verbal competitions to prove their ability.

The function of freestyling in Hip-hop is discussed by T-Love, a lyricist from Los Angeles:

Freestyling is important to the livelihood of true hip-hop because: 1. It helps keep the music form alive by encouraging creative competition among the artists, 2. It helps to define the line between an MC and just a rapper and 3. Aids in the fear of never letting people forget where hip-hop/rap came from... it has proved to be a pliable and ever-changing music form. Partially responsible for its rapid evolution is its constant breeding of competition. Where there is competition, there is change... The main difference between an MC and a rapper is freestyling. (Cross 306)

Rappers are those lyricists who can only write and recite, but can't compete in a freestyle battle; these artists compose their lyrics and characters primarily for commercial appeal. An MC on the other hand is capable of either delivering memorized rhymes or freestyling, as the situation warrants. Every MC is a rapper, but not every rapper is an MC, and the latter is thus a more interactive and versatile performer. For rappers, the competition transfers from lyrical skill to record sales, hence the materialism and shallowness that becomes the target for criticism. What is important to my discussion in this paper is the

competition entailed by freestyling and battling, a competition where the only judges are the listeners present and willing to respond. Equally central is the shifting role of speaker in a freestyle battle, where the microphone is passed from person to person, and the speaker takes turns alternately delivering rhymes and appraising the rhymes of others.

It's the black Cyrano Debergerac of rap,  
With the ghetto Anglo-Sax poetics intact.  
-Canibus<sup>10</sup>

One of the most striking similarities between Chaucer and Hip-hop appears when we consider how they both integrate oral and textual forms. Since the time of its conception Hip-hop has undergone a definite transformation from a primarily performative or non-written genre to one that incorporates more textual forms. This has occurred as the lyrics are transcribed and published, as the genre becomes an acknowledged influence on the generation of young writers who grew up listening to it, and as Hip-hop artists themselves begin to publish works of poetry and prose. One example of Hip-hop's fusion with the page is manifested in a related genre, spoken word poetry. This is a form similar to Hip-hop, but with a greater emphasis on the lyrics as poetry, conducive to being anthologized and read, rather than only heard as music; also, spoken word is not consistently rhymed, and could perhaps be called the urban equivalent of free verse.

Speaking of the connection between spoken word and hip-hop, Amiri Baraka notes: 'It's the same continuum; it just depends on where you get on the train.' Jessica Care Moore proudly admits to being influenced by hip-hop's thirty-year lineage and acknowledges that it has wielded considerable impact on spoken word poetry. Elaborating on Baraka's view, Moore says: 'Hip-hop and poetry stem from the same thing; it's just that the aesthetics are different. Hip-hop requires music... [their] lyrics show that they twist their poetry a little bit and call it hip-hop and then they put a beat underneath it, and make some money.' (Anglesey *xxi*)

Spoken word also manifests a speaker/audience relationship similar to Hiphop battling and freestyling, since spoken word poetry is also delivered to an interactive audience. “On open-mic nights, initiates to spoken word learn their poetics, not by studying Contemporary American Poetry, but the hard way – through audience approval, or disapproval”(xviii).

The interaction between orality and textuality in Hiphop lyrics greatly resembles the court poetry in Chaucer’s England, a literate manuscript culture employing the conventions of an oral poetic tradition. These early manuscripts function as direct representations of an oral transaction between fictional speaker and fictional audience, a reflection of the actual speaker and audience present at a reading. Lois Bragg examines this relationship in Old English lyrics, where “their manuscripts often mimic or record an oral performance or oral transaction... ‘You scratch out on the surface words you imagine yourself saying aloud in some realizable oral setting’”(Bragg 27). This scene is distinctly reminiscent of the Hiphop artist writing in his notebook and practicing for the chance to deliver rhymes to an audience. Tricia Rose’s description of the oral/literate dynamics involved in Hiphop lyrics sounds remarkably similar, “They are rhymes, written down first, memorized, and recited orally... oral performances that display written (literate) forms of thought and communication”(Rose 87). I would even argue that the poetry of England’s medieval manuscript culture has more in common with Hiphop lyrics than much of the text-based poetry of today. Bragg indirectly indicates this connection as well:

Modern audiences for poetry and *belles lettres* of any kind, are quite different from the Anglo-Saxon audience for works of verbal art. Poets today write for an elite audience which consists chiefly of scholars and other poets... One does not drink beer or eat pretzels or flirt with a fellow member of the audience at a poetry reading... For us, poetry usually means reading, and reading is inappropriate in a group setting. (Bragg 34)

Appropriately, one might easily find audience members drinking beer and flirting with each other at a Hiphop show.

It's the sights and sounds and smells of it that you have to capture to be a great rapper and bring listeners into the story, so they can close their eyes and it's almost like they're there.

-Jay-Z

Bragg is mainly concerned with the Old English Lyric, however, which is not my focus in this paper. The connection to Chaucer is made when he is situated in the context of this manuscript culture:

In oral cultures, the poet often is present with his audience during the presentation of the poem... in print cultures, he is absent, and usually unknown to his readers. This change came about gradually in medieval England. In a manuscript culture, the poet composes in solitude (although not in silence), but he often reads his own work to his audience. As late as the fifteenth century we find Geoffrey Chaucer portrayed as doing just that. Poetry in a manuscript culture was essentially communal not only because the poet often read his own works, but because the audience for the work was more likely to be an *audience* in the original sense of the word – a group of auditors rather than individuals who read the work privately. (Bragg 28)

Chaucer's central position in the transition from oral to manuscript to print culture complicates his sense of audience in The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer's poetry often demonstrates a strong sense of his audience as present listeners, rather than absent readers. "The word 'audience,' as he uses it, remains close to its etymological sense of 'those within hearing,' and his own poems almost always contain references to those who 'hear' or 'harken' or to whom he is 'telling' his 'tale'"(Stroh 47). This sense of a listening audience is intensified within the frame narrative of The Canterbury Tales as well, since each tale is delivered in the voice of a fictional pilgrim addressing the rest of the group. "Chaucer's interest in inscribed situations of telling and hearing is apparent at every stage of his career, but never so vividly as in the realization of his *compaignye* of pilgrim-

narrators”(Strohm 64). In reality, however, Chaucer’s audience was probably very different from this company of middle-class pilgrims. “The most plausible supposition about Chaucer’s audience is that it consisted mainly of those gentlepersons in service who, together with a few London intellectuals, [comprised] Chaucer’s social and literary circle”(Strohm 50). Also, Chaucer’s pilgrim persona in The Canterbury Tales is conscious of writing for a reading audience as well as a listening one, and occasionally makes reference to his future readers. The conflation of oral and literary forms in this text is perhaps best represented in the “Prologue to the Miller’s Tale.” Chaucer’s pilgrim persona introduces the Miller’s rude narrative with a warning: “And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale”(3176). For Chaucer it was apparently not a contradiction to “yheer” the words written on a page, which solidifies the connection between his poetry and Hiphop lyrics, since both are written explicitly to be heard and experienced, rather than simply read in silence.

The dynamics between the oral and literate aspects of Hiphop are further complicated by technology. I have so far examined Hiphop as it incorporates recorded and textual forms into a primarily oral and performative genre; this likens it to medieval manuscript culture, yet I don’t mean to suggest that Hiphop is evolving into a textual genre. English poetry transformed slowly into a print culture over centuries, responding to complex social and political factors, and as a side effect it lost much of the orality that originally defined poetry, largely represented by rhyme and/or rhythm. Hiphop on the other hand is inextricable from its orality, defined by its incorporation of complex rhymes and rhythms, and could never have the same effect or reach the same audience if it became a textual genre. In Hiphop, we see a rare fusion of oral and literary forms, where the oral

traditions are necessarily maintained, as they are in a manuscript culture, and yet still can be mass-produced, which was a characteristic exclusive to print culture before the invention of recorded sound. Tricia Rose has examined some of these complexities in Hiphop music using Walter Ong's highly influential theory, articulated in Orality and Technology: The Technologizing of the Word. She writes:

Rap is in part an expression of what Walter Ong has referred to as 'post-literate orality'...The concept of postliterate orality merges orally influenced traditions that are created and embedded... revised and presented in a technologically sophisticated context. It also has the capacity to explain the way literate-based technology is made to articulate sounds, images and practices associated with orally based forms, so that rap simultaneously makes technology oral and technologizes orality. (Rose 86)

Within Hiphop, the relationship between freestyling (MCs) and writing rhymes for recital (rappers) reveals a modern analogy for the relationship between oral and manuscript cultures in medieval England. Freestyling is inherently oral, and like oral cultures it has no recorded or textual medium for reference; the poetry exists only in the mind of the performer and in the moment of performance. Rappers are more like poets in a manuscript culture, as detailed by Bragg above, because both entail the writing of lyrics to enable an oral performance later on, either from memory or read from the page. The poetry of medieval England's manuscript culture integrates the forms and conventions of oral performance, just as digital recordings of Hiphop lyrics contain the themes of competition and verbal creativity required by the freestyle battle. In both cases the more complex recording is meant to capture the performative power of its oral predecessor.

It's the arrival of the carnival  
New beats, I never recycle  
While you looking for samples  
You might get trampled.  
-Wyclef<sup>f11</sup>

One of the greatest discrepancies between Hiphop and traditional oral cultures lies in the concept of communal authorship. In an oral culture, “narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories,” instead, “formulas and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials”(Ong 42). Hiphop artists in contrast define themselves as producing original material, and a common theme in the lyrics has always been disdain for unoriginal lyricists. This is further complicated by Hiphop’s tendency to borrow heavily from other genres, a trend reflected both in sampled music, and the constant lyrical echoes and references. Ironically, lyricists usually claim sole authorship of their lyrics:

Rap lyrics are closely linked with the author; unlike traditional Western notions of composition in which the composer’s text is in a separate sphere from that of the performer, rap lyrics are the voice of the composer and the performer. (Rose 87)

In an interesting twist, the concept of communal authorship central to Ong’s understanding of oral cultures is reflected more vividly in the music of Hiphop than in the lyrics. The use of samples and re-mixes resembles the reshuffling of themes and stories in an oral culture, and unlike the lyrics, artists take pride in creative reformulation. “Rap DJs and producers reshuffle known cultural formulas and themes. It is in this context that narrative originality is lodged”(Rose 88).

Another interpretation of this issue is raised by Costello in Signifying Rappers, and leads me to an important site for comparison. “The coldly manufactured, self-consciously derivative sound-carpet of samples over which the rapper and DJ declaim serves to focus listeners’ creative attention on the complex and human lyrics themselves.”(Costello 97) This differs from Rose’s reaction to Hiphop sampling significantly, in so far as Costello appreciates the originality of the lyrics in contrast to the “unoriginal” music, rather than appreciating the way they compliment each other by reflecting different sides of

postliterate orality. This may demonstrate the creative development of DJs over the five years between these publications, or perhaps the critical development of Hip-hop theorists. The two seem to agree, however, that the emphasis on originality in the lyrics obviously contrasts the general recycled nature of the music. Although this is still the case, the division is now far less absolute. Hip-hop today is full of original instrumentals and percussion, and many external references have entered the lyrics, which are later sampled and reintegrated into new songs. In terms of the music, Costello observes that Hip-hop sampling “is but one theft in a hoary history of ‘musical quotation’ going back to Bach – who ripped off 17<sup>th</sup>-century court dances in his *French Suite for Harpsichord* – and before”(58). As with academic writing, musical quotation in Hip-hop is acceptable if the reference is a clear tribute to its source, and becomes an offence only when the sampler tries to pass off old work as his own.

I began with a desire to speak to the dead...  
-Stephen Greenblatt

The concept of poetic authorship and intertextuality raised here is an issue that also appears recurrently in English literary criticism. Harold Bloom’s book, *The Anxiety of Influence* examines some of the effects of intertextuality in English poetry: “Poetic history... is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves”(Bloom 5). Hip-hop’s tendency to incorporate old lyrics into new songs, and even to reproduce old songs with new beats or instrumentals follows Western European poetic tradition. This tradition inevitably reflects the same ambiguity of authorship found in oral cultures, though complicated by technology. Chaucer is also writing in the context of this tradition, alongside the more imaginative Hip-hop DJs and producers who combine

the communal authorship associated with oral traditions, and the intertextuality of English poetic tradition. In both cases older work is constantly being revitalized and adapted into contemporary dialects and settings, a process that pays tribute to the original author/producer while at the same time revealing the skill of the translator through his (humble) revisions. In Hiphop we see this in both the lyrics and music:

Sampling in rap is a process of cultural literacy and intertextual reference... these samples are highlighted, functioning as a challenge to know these sounds, to make connections between the lyrical and musical texts. (Rose 89)

We often see Chaucer doing just this, only with literary, classical, and mythological references, rather than musical ones. Inevitably, all kinds of references and samples filter into Hiphop from outside of itself as well, and occasionally lyrics will contain literary allusions alongside the musical ones. This indicates yet another parallel between Hiphop culture and the manuscript culture represented by Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. Both specifically define themselves through adaptation, remixing, sampling, etc, and are unabashed in their appropriation of previous material, having arisen out of traditions patched together from fragments of other traditions.

The Canterbury Tales is a text representing an oral transaction between speaker and audience, which is typical of Chaucer: "his poetry frequently apostrophises a listening audience"(Bradbury 118). Besides the text itself, however, the internal narrative structure Chaucer has chosen to frame the tales involves the same dynamic. The Canterbury Tales takes the form of a pilgrimage composed of a diverse company of mostly middle-class pilgrims to the city of Canterbury, England, in the month of April. Along the way, each of the twenty-nine pilgrims present must take a turn as speaker and tell a story in rhymed and metered verse; those tales told in prose are set up in contrast to this norm. The tales were

adapted from classical and contemporary texts, and Chaucer's voice comes through most clearly when his narratives diverge from the original source. Chaucer narrates the entire book in the first person, recounting his fictional experience among these pilgrims by relating each individual tale in the voice of the teller, and also by detailing the framing interactions surrounding them. Although these characters are his own creations, Chaucer's pilgrim persona speaks as if the pilgrimage actually took place, and attributes each story to its teller, rather than to himself:

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,  
That ye n'arete it nat my vileynye  
Thogh that I playnly speke in this mateere,  
To telle yow hir words and hir cheere  
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.  
For this ye knowen al so wel as I:  
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan  
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,  
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,  
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe." (725)

For this comparison I am less interested in the tales themselves than the peripheral interactions that serve to contextualize them, and the various dialogues between the performing speaker and responding audience. As each tale is told, the other pilgrims, led by the Host, assume the role of critically responsive audience, and the role of speaker is passed on one by one. The dynamics at work within this group greatly resemble those found in a freestyle battle, especially since the tales are framed in a charged atmosphere of competition.

Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;  
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.  
-Prologue to The Miller's Tale (3185)

At the onset of the journey the Host proposes a game to help them pass the time pleasantly, “And therefore wol I maken yow disport / As I syde erst, and doon yow som confort.”(775) The Host’s role as mediator in this contest is much like the MC<sup>12</sup> of a freestyle battle, who introduces each lyricist and provides feedback and moderation between competitors. The Host, who is ironically described by Chaucer as a “marchel in an halle”(752) or master of ceremonies (MC), defines the competition in the “General Prologue”:

That ech of yow, to shorte with oure weye  
In this viage shal telle tales tweye...  
Of adventures that whilom han bifalle.  
And which of yow that bereth hym best of alle –  
That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas  
Tales of best sentence and moost solaas –  
Shal have a soper at oure aller cost. (791)

These lines are central to my understanding of The Canterbury Tales through the contextual framing of the stories, since they inform the audience-speaker relationships in this text. The prize indicated, “a soper at oure aller cost,”(36) is never awarded at the end of the pilgrimage, since Chaucer leaves the text incomplete, without finishing the game or naming a winner. The token prize is thus overshadowed by the potential achievement of out-performing twenty-eight other speakers, and the emphasis in this competition is not on the actual champion, but on the competitive atmosphere in which the tales are delivered.

Competition in The Canterbury Tales takes various forms, as the pilgrims occasionally provide each other with positive or negative feedback after their tales have ended, argue over whose turn it is to speak next, and even interrupt each other half-way through a story, the ultimate insult. We see this behavior manifesting itself as soon as the contest is begun, in the Prologue to the Miller’s Tale. When the Knight completes his tale,

the Host compliments him, and suggests the Monk go next, but the drunken Miller interjects and asserts his own right to speak. What follows is an argument between the Host and the Miller, who is determined to tell his tale:

“By armes, and by blood and bones,  
I kan a noble tale for the nones,  
With which I now quite the Knyghtes tale.”  
Oure Hooste saugh that he was dronke of ale.  
An seyde, “Abyd, Robyn, my leeve brother;  
Som bettre man shal telle us first another.”(3125)

The Monk is silent, but the Reeve takes offense at the Miller’s rudeness and assertively joins in the debate, basically telling the Miller to shut up, “Stynt thy clappe! / Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye”(3144). Eventually, the Miller proceeds with his story, but the outburst reveals Chaucer’s deliberate portrayal of the competitive tension between these fictional characters.

Visceral, onomatopoeic, and loaded with the kind of juice most poets dream about tapping into, the best rap feels spontaneous and competitive.

-Gregor and Dimitri Ehrlich

Many critics have questioned Chaucer’s reasons for casting The Canterbury Tales in this competitive framework; Lerer alludes to one possible reason in his discussion of Chaucer’s narrative strategies:

Throughout his works, Chaucer imagines that community which authorizes him to write... Defining himself as an author necessarily involves finding a strategy to “direct and delimit the interpretive activity” of that community, in other words, to develop a stance or a persona that controls the possibilities of audience response while at the same time posing to invite the range of audience participation. (Lerer 10)

The story-telling contest offers a sphere in which Chaucer’s characters can respond to one another interactively, parodying the potential responses of his actual audience. Critics also posit the competitive framework as a vital outlet for social tension, such as the

Miller's "class-based narrative vendetta against the Knight"(Kiser 128). It is important to remember that Chaucer himself was both a politician and a poet, yet to be consistent in my approach I must once again opt for the poetic interpretation over the political one.

Perhaps Chaucer's depiction of this company of would-be poets was largely informed by his experience of competing poets at court, and the pilgrims' competitive interactions are meant as a parody of this familiar sphere. Certainly the language of court permeates the tales, usually problematically, and occasionally even satirically. I would argue, however, that Chaucer has framed his masterpiece in a competitive context not as a criticism of such conflicts, but rather to emphasize the importance of poetic competition, which promotes creativity, ensures novelty, and prevents stagnation.

In this contest the aspects of each story that will determine which "bereth best of all,"(796) or the winner, are the "best sentence and moost solaas"(798). Chaucer's use of "sentence" and "solaas" as the standard for judgement has prompted various responses.

Kiser suggested that these were meant as mutually exclusive terms:

[The Host's] principle that the tales should have 'sentence' and 'solaas,' which coincides with classical and medieval ideals, quickly proves to be applied in an erratic fashion, for [the Host] sees the two concepts as somehow incompatible, impossible to achieve in a single performance. (Kiser 123)

I disagree with that interpretation; in fact, I think the Host uses this contrast for the opposite reason. He makes a clear distinction between the two terms, not because they are irreconcilable in a single tale, but rather to assert the necessity of both, and the importance of balance. The use of "sentence and solaas" instead of "sentence or solaas" suggests the Host's aversion to tales that are either too preachy or too comedic, two extremes represented by the Parson's and Miller's tales, and his tendency to antagonize these two characters may reflect his distaste for such polarization.

This dichotomy is recurrent in Chaucer's poetry, and he returns to these themes often when writing self-reflexively, or when referring to the poetry of his fictional speakers. "Sentence" in this case means "significance," or "meaning." The OED definition of "sentence" indicated here is "The thought or meaning expressed, as distinguished from the wording; the sense, substance, or gist (of a passage, a book, etc)"(OED). This is one criterion by which the speakers will be judged; their stories must have some meaning, and provide edification as well as being entertaining. "Solaas" is translated in Benson's notes into "pleasure," which works well, but the OED elaborates with the definition, "To cheer, comfort or console; to entertain or recreate"(OED). As indicated by the OED's definition of "sentence" with the phrase, "as distinguished from the wording," the "solaas" of a text is closely tied to the sound produced by the words. Of course, entertainment value can also be a product of the meaning, but the traditional dichotomy between sound and meaning in poetry is definitely alluded to by such a division:

The most satisfying reading of a poem involves a simultaneous engagement of... the meaning of words [and] the grouping and spacing of sounds... the intimate relationship between its form and its content. (Norton Anthology of Poetry 855)

The criteria the host uses to define the competition in The Canterbury Tales, that the stories must be both entertaining and enlightening, reflects this dichotomy, which is obviously nothing new in poetry; Horace raised these same issues in classic Rome, and they were probably weren't new then either. Although the interplay of sound and meaning is perhaps inherent in all poetry, it is only in self-reflexive texts such as Hiphop lyrics and The Canterbury Tales that we see these themes become the explicit subject of the verse, unifying the medium and message.

If I want an education, I'll go to school. I think of music as entertainment.  
-Matt Dike, producer.

The dichotomy between sound and meaning in poetry is also central to one of the greatest divisions within Hiphop: rap as entertainment versus rap as information, a conflict manifested both in the lyrics and in the critical debates surrounding the genre. Some artists and producers consider Hiphop a medium for educating and informing people, while others would prefer to reduce it to simply a form of entertainment:

Chip-fu, MC:

Rap is just a language for expression of what has happened from generation to generation. But you know that you can relate to a wider crowd if you just add some dope beats when you tell your story. (80)

Queen Latifah, MC:

I can't sit there and make a whole album full of messages, because then I don't have any fun. I'm not a scholar or professor, so I can't make a whole album full of teaching, 'cause I'm still learning. (76)

Red Alert, DJ:

Conscious rap got diluted because people were doing it so much that listeners were getting bored and wanted to hear something different. KRS-One knew how to do it in a way where he also entertained you. Just like Public Enemy. You would have Chuck D giving you information but it didn't bore you because you had Flavor Flav on the side being humorous and comical. So you have to learn how to balance that. When conscious rap came out, everybody jumped on the bandwagon, but then when L.L. Cool J came out with 'Jinglin' Baby' people said 'I'm tired of hearing that conscious stuff. Let's party now.' (75)

In both Hiphop and The Canterbury Tales the quality of a speaker's poetry is undermined if the emphasis shifts too far towards either pole, sacrificing the entertainment value to enhance the message, or compromising the meaning conveyed by appealing to the lowest common denominator. In both cases, the most effective speakers must find a balance that satisfies the audience's need for entertainment, while at the same time infusing their lyrics with intelligence and insight.

As in Hiphop, the criteria by which speakers will be judged in The Canterbury Tales is their ability to entertain and also edify, sound good, be enjoyable, and convey a

message, and the audience's reactions will be determined by these two factors. The dialogue in the frame narrative that provides the greatest insight into this concept occurs around "The Tale of Sir Topas," the pilgrim Chaucer's own contribution to the contest. The Host introduces Chaucer's character to us, and we hear about his actions and appearance for the first time, since up to this point none of his verse has been explicitly self-descriptive. In the "Prologue to Sir Thopas," the Host describes Chaucer's pilgrim persona as shy and weak:

"This were a popet in an arm t'enbrace  
For any womman, smal and fair of face;  
He semeth elvish by his countenance,  
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce." (213)

Calling Chaucer a puppet and drawing attention to his reserved, anti-social behavior serves to diminish him, but also to mystify his character. The term "elvish" is especially peculiar, since it signifies: "weird, supernatural" and also "mischievous" in the OED; if the Host is laughing at him, it is a nervous laughter. Benson points out that the Host's: "condescension to Chaucer, as an obscure and unpromising participant in the tale-telling, provides an apt introduction to the ensuing tale"(Benson 917). When Chaucer is asked to tell a tale, he humbly replies, "oother tale certes kan I noon, / But of a rym I lerned longe agoon"(213). This is certainly an ironic statement, especially considering the wealth of narratives Chaucer has already demonstrated familiarity with. Part of the effect of this self-portrayal is that Chaucer distinguishes himself from the other pilgrims as a story-teller:

In contrast to most of the other pilgrims – who are artist figures of great imagination, controllers and shapers of narratives to the extent that each of their tales serves its artists' purposes with astonishing closeness – the narrator offers up a "rym I lerned longe agoon:"(709) something that is, he says, the only tale he knows. (Kiser 117)

And for ther is so gret diversite  
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,  
So prey I God that non myswrite the,  
Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge;  
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,  
That thow be understonde, God I beseche!  
But yet to purpos of my rather speche: (1793)  
-Troilus and Criseyde

“The Tale of Sir Topas” itself is a parody of English romantic and minstrel verse. It represents a marked divergence from Chaucer’s usual poetic style and standards. The meter is uncharacteristically irregular, and the rhymes are less poetically precise than they are anywhere else in his work. “Perhaps Chaucer had in mind the pointless metrical variations to be found in some popular romance texts... He also imitates their loose rhyming technique, allowing himself several uncharacteristic licenses”(917). In other words, Chaucer is deliberately portraying his pilgrim persona as a bad poet, or rather as a parody of bad poets in general, mimicking:

Their ‘long-winded and inconsequent stories’, their ‘want of plan and method and meaning’, their ‘excessive use of insignificant detail’, their ‘bourgeois absurdities in setting forth knight-errantry’ and, above all, their use of the ‘word devices of minstrel style’, with its ‘reiterated commonplace rhymes and phrases’. (Bradbury 119)

The hero of the tale, Sir Topas, is described in just this sort of language:

Sir Thopas wax a doghty swayn;  
Whit was his face as payndemayn,  
His lippes rede as rose;  
His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,  
And I yow telle in good certayn  
He hadde a semely nose. (724)

The description of his face specifically draws my attention, since “payndemayn” is translated as “fine white bread.” Chaucer’s use of “white bread” to belittle Sir Topas’ features ironically echoes the same term used by some rappers as a racist slur for white

people. For Chaucer this reference would not have had racial connotations, however. The way it is used here, “white bread” signifies upper-class pretensions, as in the “milk and wastel-breed”(147) associated with the Prioress in the General Prologue, rather than the bland Wonder-Bread we would think of today, yet it is interesting that this exists as a common derogatory term. This sort of parody continues throughout the tale, as Sir Topas embarks on various senseless adventures, narrated in language that is similarly pretentious:

Yet listeth, lordes, to my tale  
Murier than the nightyngale,  
For now I wol yow rowne  
How sir Thopas, with sydes smale,  
Prikyng over hill and dale,  
Is comen agayn to towne. (833)

The effect of this ironic self-reflexivity is that the worst verses of all are those of the composer himself:

The point is in the admirable irony of the whole conception of the dumb or doggerel rhymers who is nevertheless the author of all the other rhymes; nay, even the author of their authors. (Chesterton 22)

Critical response to this tale has varied; Bradbury points out that traditionally critics have accepted it as simply a parody of the type of flowery verse Chaucer found distasteful,

For centuries, the pilgrim-narrator’s first tale has been regarded as a “criticism of fourteenth-century minstrelsy”; more specifically, in the words of the eighteenth-century Chaucer editor Thomas Tyrwhitt, it was ‘clearly intended to ridicule the “palpable, gross” fictions of the common rhymers of that age, and still more, perhaps, the meanness of their language and versification’. (Bradbury 119)

She elaborates on the tale’s function by drawing links between “Sir Thopas” and some of Chaucer’s more serious verse, extending it into poetic self-parody:

Frequently in Chaucer we see self-consciousness shading into self-parody, and the first tale he gives to his fictional representative in *The Canterbury Tales* is such an instance. Sir Thopas is not only a parody of English minstrelsy, but... represents 'many of the weaknesses and some of the strengths not merely of the hacks but also of the true poets of the age, including Chaucer himself'. (Bradbury 121)

In both cases, however, the importance of "The Tale of Sir Thopas" is its use of poetic parody, and Chaucer's decision to deliver the tale himself indicates to me that this parody is at least partially self-directed. The relevance of "Thopas" to my argument lies more in the surrounding dialogue than the tale itself, and I must therefore treat it as Lerer has:

A literary text whose meaning inheres not in the details of its narrative or characterizations but instead in the simple fact of its existence. Whether we see it as Chaucer's parody of the tale-rhyme romance or as the pilgrim's joke on the Host, we make its meaning pedant on the externals of literary drama or generic environment. (Lerer 95)

"The Tale of Sir Thopas" is unfinished, a deliberate narrative device Chaucer uses to convey a sense of poetic justice in the text. Evidently a tale so poor does not deserve to run its course.

And whan this wise man saugh that hym wanted audience, al  
shamefast he sette hym doun agayn.  
For Salomon seith: "Ther as thou ne mayst have noon audience,  
enforche thee nat to speke."  
-"The Tale of Melibee" (1042)

The significance of "The Tale of Sir Topas" to speaker/audience interactions in The Canterbury Tales is driven home when the Host rudely interrupts it after only a few pages:

"Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,"  
Quod oure Hooste, "for thou makest me  
So wery of thy verray lewednesse .  
That, also wisly God my soule blesse,  
Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche.  
Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!  
This may wel be rym dogerel." (2109)

The tone of the entire scene is humorous and playful, yet the Host shows no restraint in this statement, revealing his comic outrage at Chaucer's pathetic tale, which causes him to condemn it to the devil because it is so "drasty" or "crappy." Chaucer is wounded by this total affront to his humble attempt at narration, and complains:

"Why so?" quod I, "why wiltow lette me  
Moore of my tale than another man,  
Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?" (2116)

Chaucer's argument that this is his best and only rhyme elicits no more sympathy from the Host than it would in a Hiphop battle, and Chaucer's pilgrim persona is barred from rhyming because of his total ineptness. The Host, relentless, continues to insult Chaucer's poetic skills and the emptiness of his tale:

"By God," quod he, "for playnly, at a word  
Thy drasty rymying is not worth a toord!  
Thou doost noght elles but despendest tyme.  
Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme." (2119)

These sort of insults directed at a speaker's poetic ability and lack of content are well established conventions in Hiphop as well, and as in The Canterbury Tales each is considered an equally integral aspect of the delivery. The statement, "I don't get on stage and waste your time / MCs got a lot to say, but they just can't rhyme,"(Mos Def)<sup>13</sup> resembles the Host's criticism of Chaucer's "drasty rhyming." On the other hand, "A million MCs and they ain't sayin' nothin'," (Pharoah Monch)<sup>14</sup> is a similar statement to the Host's criticism of Chaucer's empty speech. The comment the Chaucer has done nothing but waste his audience's time finds characteristically exaggerated parallels in Hiphop lyrics as well, where lyricists often accuse each other of lacking content:

Nowadays everybody wanna talk like they got  
Somethin' to say but nothin' comes out

When they move their lips, just a bunch of jibberish. (Eminem)<sup>15</sup>

Besides its parallels in Hiphop, Chaucer's "drasty rhyming" that "dispendest time" relates back to the criteria established at the beginning of the competition. The tales were to be judged on the grounds of "sentence" and "solaas," both of which were unfulfilled by Chaucer's tale, according to the Host. This is revealed when the Host proposes that, since Chaucer is no poet, he should instead tell a tale in prose: "In which ther be some murthe or som doctryne"(2125). "Mirth," signifies "pleasure or enjoyment"(OED) and "doctrine," besides its obvious religious connotations, indicates "teaching or instruction"(OED). Although they are not identical terms, "mirth" and "doctrine" represent a poetic distinction similar to "solaas" and "sentence," and in this case signify the pilgrim Chaucer's ironic failure meet the common criteria established for his own fictional competition.

Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,  
Al have I nat set folk in hir degree  
Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde.  
My wit is short, ye may wel understonde. (743)  
-“General Prologue”

The comedic irony of this incident is that the reader is aware of Chaucer's role as composer of every line in The Canterbury Tales. Through the obvious structural and stylistic differences between "The Tale of Sir Topas" and the rest of The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer is highlighting a distinct contrast between the two forms. The Host's appraisal of the unforgivably poor quality of this one tale therefore serves as a validation of the work as a whole. If Chaucer's "Sir Topas" is essentially a story worthy only of being silenced, yet most of the other pilgrims are allowed to finish, this implies the superior quality of the completed tales, which make up more than ninety-nine percent of the text. Chaucer is thus twisting his modesty around, so that what appears to be humility

becomes in fact an act of ironic self-assurance. The surprisingly far-reaching positive implication of “Sir Thopas” to the entire narrative is no doubt deliberate, calling to mind Chesterton’s observation that: “The Chaucerian Irony is sometimes so large that it is too large to be seen”(20).

These subtle manifestations of the poet’s ego, although perhaps tame by our standards, must be understood as fairly subversive acts in the fourteenth century. This signifies one of the greatest affinities between Chaucer and today’s Hiphop artists. Chaucer lived during a time when originality was considered proud and therefore sinful, and genius was lodged in respectful adaptations of previous material. This mentality is a stark contrast to the ideals of individuality and innovation championed in our culture. Hiphop represents one contemporary art form where adapting, revising, remixing, and the like are held in high esteem, and not scorned as mere imitation. The acceptable recycling of music exists in Hiphop as a contrast to the requirements of purity and originality in the lyrics, which demand perpetual novelty to avoid falling into the realm of cliché. We are already familiar with so many rhymes from popular poetry that the challenge in Hiphop is now to find new and unique combinations, since over-used rhymes fail to produce the desired effect in the audience, as demonstrated by the Host’s reaction to “Sir Thopas.” Like Hiphop music, Chaucer’s poetry defines itself through the recycling of material, themes, and conventions, and like Hiphop lyrics, Chaucer recasts everything he writes in his individual voice, claiming it as his own. Today Hiphop artists have no qualms about promoting their own brilliance and originality, and it’s common for artists to credit themselves with greater verbal skill and creativity than their competitors. Chaucer, on the other hand, lived in a time when such self-promotion was not accepted, and humility was a

virtue, and thus he could not have given himself the degree of attention found in Hiphop lyrics. (Nor, I believe, would he have succumbed to such shameless self-involvement if he had the chance.) Chaucer has, however, infused The Canterbury Tales with clear manifestations of the poet's healthy ego – a focus taken to such obscene lengths in Hiphop – yet he has managed to allow himself credit without letting self-reflexivity lapse into self-indulgence. The delicate balance between personal touch and skillful incorporation of previous material is what gives both The Canterbury Tales and the best Hiphop their widespread appeal. In both cases the pleasure of the text must find harmony with the message, incorporating poetics and politics, solace and sentence, mirth and doctrine. Any shift too far towards one pole or the other will likely result in a loss of audience, and thus a loss of impact.

Because of rap's meteoric rise, though, you've got poor kids, tough kids, 'underachievers,' a 'lost generation'... more young people – ostensibly forever turned off 'language' by T.V, video games, and low [education] budgets – more of these kids hunched over notebooks on their own time, trying to put words together in striking and creative ways, than [the world] has probably ever had at one time.

-David Foster Wallace

My intention with this paper was to take two poetic forms divided by as much time and cultural history as any two in the English language and draw them together as best I could in comparison. In the beginning I was well aware of the irony of holding a fourteenth century book in one hand and a few contemporary CDs in the other, and asserting their basic similarity. It is my understanding, however, that some of the most highly respected texts of the English literary canon began as low-class, popular, trashy, and often communal art forms. Theatre is a fine example, Shakespeare, the novel, various manuscripts, the short story, and dozens of poets who published their work as songs,

gaining popular recognition first, and academic recognition later. Much of what we study today was conceived without the pretensions of high art, intended first of all as a form of entertainment, and, when paid closer attention, revealing itself as equally enlightening. Chaucer also embodies this process in his poetry, and it is generally recognized that his genius lies in an ability to deftly merge “high” and “low” art, adapting the classics to vernacular English, while at the same time revising popular narratives in the literary iambic couplet form. Concrete distinctions between popular and literary genres are challenged by works as complex as The Canterbury Tales, which, like much literature, gains part of its definition, character, and appeal by absorbing popular forms. It is my contention that Hiphop is moving in a similar direction, and will achieve further academic acceptance as generations of poets adopt it as a potent medium for expression.

Hiphop music, I believe, owes much of its popular appeal to its embodiment of the performative interaction between poet-speaker and audience, a scene that is highly reminiscent of the oral roots behind much literary poetry in English. The same power that has drawn audiences for centuries to mead-houses to hear poetry also draws fans to see Hiphop performances at clubs today. Also, the ornaments of speech that have always instilled audiences with pleasure at a speaker’s verbal skill and creativity, rhyme and rhythm, are embraced by Hiphop rather than rejected. Hiphop lyrics seem closer to poetry’s source, closer to the distinct sense of orality that Chaucer has captured in The Canterbury Tales, than most poetry appearing on the page. Ezra Pound’s remark, “poetry begins to atrophy the farther it gets from music” seems appropriate here, since oral performances draw poetry closer to music. I would add that poetry also begins to atrophy if it is removed from a competitive atmosphere, which ensures change and versatility in

the genre. The important role of competition in poetry's evolutionary process is a theme I see reflected in The Canterbury Tales and manifested throughout Hiphop lyrics. Perhaps we are seeing this idea emerge most clearly in the works of those poets who have been exposed to an excess of bad poetry, and recognize stiff competition as the only remedy for outpourings of "drasty rhyming"(2120).

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## Discography

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The Roots, *Illadelph Halflife* (Geffen, 1996)

Wyclef Jean, *The Carnival* (Sony, 1997)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> i.e. in English that can be read without translation.

<sup>2</sup> From the album, *This or That*, track 29.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the only mention I found was made in passing in the book, *Signifying Rappers:*

“The hip-hop artist must present himself and his rap to a tough audience as at once for and of that audience... The historical figure in whom these two crucial rapper identities best unite are, yes, the Blue Trickster of West African myth, but also the actual storytelling minstrel/troubadour of the European Dark Ages, the traveling rogue who performed for king and cooper both, singing (especially in Provençal) ever of himself.”(Costello, 116)

<sup>4</sup> The source of this quote is an email I received early on in this project from a grad student, Wayde Compton.

<sup>5</sup> In “PLO Style,” a song released by Method Man in 1994, a line from Sir Walter Scott, “What a tangled web we weave, / when first we practice to deceive,” is incorporated fluidly into the lyrics.

<sup>6</sup> From the album, *Black on Both Sides*, track 15.

<sup>7</sup> From the album, *The Slim Shady LP*, track 9.

<sup>8</sup> From 1995 to 1998 rap became the fastest growing genre, with sales growth of 51% during that three-year period.

<sup>9</sup> From the album, *Illadelph Halflife*, track 8.

<sup>10</sup> From the album, *Can-I-bus*, track 11.

<sup>11</sup> From the album, *The Carnival*, track 2.

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<sup>12</sup> This MC is a different character than the competing lyricist MCs. The mediator is an MC in the original sense of the word, a Master of Ceremonies, whereas the competitors use the initials to signify Mic Controller, as well. The Host's role could thus be seen as the MC of MCs.

<sup>13</sup> From the album, Soundbombing, track 13.

<sup>14</sup> From the album, Internal Affairs, track 4.

<sup>15</sup> From the album, Chronic 2001, track 10.