

PREFACE

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.

Like its namesake, this is a book about storytelling, and about the way stories are carried on through different forms, languages, cultures, and centuries. The simplest version goes like this: a few years ago I took some stories from a fourteenth-century manuscript and rewrote them into a contemporary rhyme style and they are printed here. We could leave it at that and simply allow these stories to have their impact (skip to page 66 for this option), but stories tend to produce stories of their own, and the ones I chose to translate seem to have accumulated some density. In the general prologue you will also learn how my source created his stories, and why he chose to use iambic pentameter couplets to tell them, and why I chose a more recent rhyme format for my translation, and where those two different forms come from and how they are related. In fact, over the past few years I have found it impossible to tell the stories in *The Rap Canterbury Tales* without also telling the story of how their creation came about, which now deserves an explanation.

This book began as the solution to a problem. Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* over the last two decades of the fourteenth century, and it has brought him over six hundred years of imitation and reverence. However, today Chaucer's poetry is only generally accessible to scholars and students of Middle English. The rhyming verse in *The Canterbury Tales* is explicitly designed for oral recitation, as was all poetry in the Middle Ages, but the language is too different from our own to retain its original impact. The problem, as I saw it, was that Chaucer's literary importance has always been a function of his popularity, and his popularity was waning. I wanted to bring these stories back to life, but translating them into prose would only stifle the lyricism in Chaucer's narrative voice. On the other hand, translating them into a contemporary iambic pentameter would still feel

archaic to the modern ear. What I needed was a new medium that would capture the same ethos as Chaucer did for his age: a live performance mode rich with wordplay and lyrical nuance, with a technique that could grab a live audience's attention and hold it long enough to tell a complex story.

At the same time, I saw this translation project as the solution to another problem. I have been involved with hip-hop culture and rap music (hip-hop's oral expression), either as an avid listener or as an artist, since the age of eleven, and I see it as the embodiment and essence of what poetry should be, and once was. Hip-hop is the site where literature is produced before it is recognized as literature: the pen, the pad, the stage, the performer, and the crowd. Whether or not any individual creation is recognized as literature is the business of forensic scholars; what is more important today is hip-hop's emerging status as the source of more creative juice than any other musical or literary genre. This is partially a function of its simplicity and accessibility, since rhyme, rhythm, and storytelling are such universal human instincts. However, at this point hip-hop must be recognized as the primary creative source because it is now the preferred medium of expression for the first-ever globally connected generation. This unifying potential should be a cause for celebration, but previous generations still tend to resent and fear hip-hop culture and denounce it as a corrupting influence, mostly because of widespread misrepresentation of the culture's core values in the media.

The humble ambition that inspired me to write *The Rap Canterbury Tales* was a desire to resurrect Chaucer's brilliant stories from their vellum mausoleum by giving them a new form that would once again delight and edify live listening audiences, while at the same time redeeming hip-hop in the eyes of my parents' generation. Since Chaucer is an unassailable icon of literary culture and the old guard, I saw his poetry as a valuable tool to dismantle the widespread prejudice against hip-hop culture, which gave birth to the art form I love. Also, since hip-hop is an unassailable icon of contemporary cool, I saw it as the perfect medium to deliver Chaucer's message to a younger generation growing indifferent to the delights of archaic literature.

I chose to translate only the specific *Canterbury Tales* that would work best in a live performance context—stories with a coherent narrative thread, a solid and conclusive ending, and intrigues involving those old stalwarts of pop culture: sex and violence. For the past six years I have performed various incarnations of these stories in front of thousands of people around the world, as well as setting them to a hip-hop soundtrack and recording them

in the form of a rap album. Until now, they have existed only in the form of sound waves and digital files and never on paper, except in my notebook. They are presented here, along with Chaucer's original Middle English and my explanatory introductions, as the best possible way of telling the story of how these stories came about, and what they were meant to do. There is more here than I could ever get a live audience to sit through, and it is only at this point in the story's evolution that I am willing to leave the listener behind, briefly. It is my hope, however, that reading this book will do more for your appreciation of poetry off the page than anything I could say to you in person, or in rhyme. Experience precedes formulation, and the spoken word precedes the written, but once you have read, I invite you to listen.

Recordings of these *Tales* are available at www.babasword.com.

GENERAL PROLOGUE

Ther is no newe gyse, that it nas old.

This story begins in April, when spring rains engender flowers, birds sing, and people start to think about going on pilgrimages. In the first April of the new millennium I was busy finishing my English honours thesis, “Competitive Poetics: A Comparison of Speaker/Audience Relationships in Hip-hop Lyrics and *The Canterbury Tales*.” When my last assignments were handed in I would leave the city to work in the mountains for the summer, planting trees. I was also busy making travel plans for autumn, the beginning of my hard-earned post-graduation year off. My plan was to go to England to perform my newly minted hip-hop adaptation of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Knights Tale* at the Canterbury Festival 2000, a celebration marking the six-hundredth anniversary of the poet’s death. This was amazing synchronicity, I thought.

But he that departed is in everi place
Is nowher hol, as written clerkes wyse.
.
As plaunte a tree or herbe, in sondrey wyse,
And on the morwe pulle it up as blyve!
No wonder is, though it may nevere thryve.

You may ask yourself, how did I get here? The idea came to me about nine months earlier. I was at my summer job, planting trees on a muddy clear-cut, thinking about rap music and about traditional English poetry, and for the first time I recognized them as part of the same continuum. My reasoning was simple: if Shakespeare is poetry, then rap is poetry. This is not to say that any living rapper is necessarily on par with Shakespeare as a poet, but rather that rap fills virtually the same social niche: live performances of oral storytelling and lyrical entertainment. The general perception of rap as a popular form unsuited to literary subject matter only reinforces the correlation, since Shakespeare’s plays were also a form of populist entertainment, and were only later adopted by academics and hailed as great literature in hindsight. Storytelling and language arts once existed only as live performances, and our

appetite for literature today has its roots in that experience. Perhaps rap has succeeded by speaking directly to that instinct in a way that contemporary poetry rarely does. If the enduring relevance of literature is a function of popular appeal rather than intellectual pretensions, then rap music may be the Elizabethan theatre of our time. The specific connection to Chaucer didn't occur to me at first, simply because I was less familiar with him, but I was sure this correlation would extend far beyond Shakespeare.

Associating rap with literature made immediate sense to me logically, but the connection also became a source of creative inspiration. I had recently started writing lyrics and performing as a hip-hop artist, and my intention was to make it professionally. However, I was also three years into an English degree and clearly the demands on a scholar's time were not compatible with launching a music career. At least by making hip-hop lyrics my subject I could advance my understanding of the art form in tandem with my skills. Hip-hop appealed to me as a creative outlet partially because it makes such brilliant use of rhyme and rhythm, devices that traditionally marked the difference between poetry and prose. Hip-hop artists and literary poets of the past are united by their use of structured language, while contemporary poets tend to reject formal devices in favour of free verse. In Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick complains, "I was not born under a rhyming planet," as if skill with rhymes were an innate quality that some people are simply endowed with, either by providence or by genetic disposition. However, if rhyming planets do exert an influence on poetic form, then most of the twentieth century has been a bit of a dark age, and scientists have yet to discover a lyrical gene to correct the problem. Yet rappers now routinely claim to be possessed by rhyme in the same fatalistic way, as in the words of Bubba Sparxxx, "I ain't choose to rhyme; rhymin' chose me." I realized that there had to be a connection between the formal parallels (rhyme and rhythm) and the parallels in function (live entertainment), all of which seemed to put both hip-hop and traditional English poetry at odds with today's published free verse. The inspiration I felt that day in the summer of 1999 was not so much an epiphany as an overwhelming sense of curiosity, compelling me to explore.

Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,
And diverse practyk in many sundry werkes

As with many theories, I began with an intuitive certainty and then faced the daunting challenge of proving the correlation with evidence. When I returned to university in September for my final year I immediately

announced to my supervisors that rap lyrics would be the subject of my honours thesis, and that I wanted to connect rap with literary history. They actually took this better than you might expect. The main caveat I got was that I wouldn't get away with doing less research simply because I had picked a "fun" subject. So I hit the library, and was surprised to find quite a few books on hip-hop culture waiting for me, shattering my assumption that the study of rap would be relatively virgin academic territory. However, most of these books and articles discussed hip-hop in terms of political science and cultural studies rather than literature, tracing the music's roots in the oral traditions of the African Diaspora. The only explicit connections I could find between rap artists and literary poets were references within the lyrics themselves. While cultural scholars were pronouncing rappers the inheritors of the Nigerian griot storyteller, Black Thought from The Roots was rapping, "My style's got the rhythm that of an Anglo Saxon"; Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest proclaimed, "It's the Abstract Poet, prominent like Shakespeare"; and my favourite thinking-man's rapper at the time, Canibus, growled, "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 / Yo, the whole Dead Poet's Society couldn't mess around with the talent."

What I also discovered when I began to research rap in earnest was that its cultural context was far larger and more complex than I had imagined. By 1999 rap had spread from its origins in New York City in the seventies into every urban centre on the planet. I read about rappers in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, South America, and dozens of other places I had never imagined hip-hop to exist. I also found that each of these sub-cultures had managed to claim hip-hop for its own, adapting the art form to local needs and circumstances. Even its roots were being debated. Most of the books and articles treated hip-hop specifically as a black cultural phenomenon, but one article that stood out for me was about the Latino roots of hip-hop. The argument was that the origins of hip-hop were equal parts black and Latino but blacks had unfairly taken full credit for it, and these early Latino rappers could trace their cultural roots back to the ancient Aztec warrior poets of Mexico. This immediately gave me pause to think about my own intentions, since I was reading articles by black writers about rap's African roots, articles by Latinos about rap's Aztec roots, and I was planning to make an argument connecting rappers to white Europeans.

Apparently each person who engages with hip-hop culture, either as an artist or a critic (if there's a difference), tends to imagine hip-hop in the context of their own heritage, but these perspectives can't all have equal

historical merit. If the people who invented hip-hop were all black and Latino then theirs are the roots of the culture, yet few would argue that hip-hop is of pure stock in the same way as, say, pre-contact indigenous peoples' traditions. Hip-hop's original roots didn't grow in a vacuum; they were quickly grafted from all sides and nurtured in the American urban melting pot under the influence of post-industrial European institutions. However, I wasn't out to claim hip-hop's roots as European, only to show that hip-hop has grown into the cultural space once filled by European poets, who themselves were the inheritors of bards and oral storytellers. The challenge with oral traditions is that they leave no physical record, so they can't be studied in the same way as the written word. It is usually only possible to discuss them through the work of ethnographers and anthropologists, or sometimes in terms of written texts that employ oral storytelling techniques. Rappers, on the other hand, write their lyrics down and mass-produce them for resale, activities more familiar to post-literate European poets than pre-literate African griots. However, when it comes to oral traditions it could be said that all roads lead to Africa, since modern humans are all descended from African ancestors. African Americans are more directly connected to this heritage, but if you trace any culture's oral tradition back far enough it will lead to the same place. Some rappers even see hip-hop as Africa's gift to the world, a form of global creative redemption by way of slavery and the Diaspora. This view is explained by Common, a rap artist from Chicago: "[Black people] are obviously shining our light to the world, and went through these trials and tribulations for a certain reason."

Besides navigating this cultural labyrinth, my real challenge was narrowing the subject down to more concrete terms without losing sight of the greater trend. I began to hunt through the canon for stylistic analogies and discovered some interesting parallels. For instance, the rhymed short-line verse structure of John Skelton's sixteenth-century poem "Phillip Sparrow" is almost identical to DMX's rhyme style in "Rough Rider's Anthem," which was a hit song at the time. I also found dozens of parallels in the content of traditional poetry and rap lyrics, such as Thomas Wyatt, "Then seek no more out of thyself to find / The thing that thou hast sought so long before / For thou shalt feel it sitting in thy mind," and Blackalicious, "The final destination used to be my main question / But then I looked and all that I was searching for was present." This was a scavenger hunt though, yielding interesting tidbits but no smoking gun. That same semester I was also enrolled in my first full course on Chaucer's poetry, and I began to get into his world through close readings in tutorial. Historically Chaucer

seemed like an excellent candidate for comparison with hip-hop because of his closeness to the oral traditions of England and the extent of his influence on future generations of poets, including Shakespeare, and also because Chaucer's particular dialect of English was later accepted as the written standard. For these and many other reasons he has been recognized for centuries as the "father of English poetry," and thus Chaucer and hip-hop could be seen as bookends representing the earliest and latest expressions of rhymed narrative verse in the English language.

And though I nat the same wordes seye
 As ye han herd, yet to yow alle I preye
 Blameth me nat; for, as in my sentence,
 Shul ye nowher fynden difference

The most remarkable analogies I found between Chaucer and hip-hop were not only historical, however; they were also reflected explicitly in the organizational structure of *The Canterbury Tales*. The text consists of a collection of stories that Chaucer wrote over the course of about fifteen years towards the end of his life. Some of the *Tales* were apparently composed before he began the compilation, while others were obviously tailor-made for the project. To bring all of these different stories together into one, Chaucer creates a fictional company of pilgrims riding on horseback from London to Canterbury, who all decide to play a game to help pass the time along the way: a storytelling contest. Each tale represents an entry in the contest by one of the pilgrims, and Chaucer ascribes certain personality traits to each of them, which are then reflected in the tale. What begins on the surface as a religious pilgrimage soon takes a profane turn when the stories become a vehicle for challenges and insults aimed at the other pilgrims. Chaucer employs the competition as a unifying principle, and also as a device to expose social tensions among the pilgrims, while showcasing their different storytelling techniques and levels of ability.

The clearest analogy for this storytelling contest model in hip-hop culture is the phenomenon of the freestyle battle, a live performance event that underlies the majority of recorded rap lyrics either in style or content. By definition, a freestyle is a rap that is unwritten and unrehearsed, composed by the rapper in the moment of performance, with rhymes that are improvised on beat and, when required, on topic. A freestyle battle is when two or more rappers compete in this way head to head, using punch lines, boasts, and insults to out-rhyme and outwit their opponents. The two terms

aren't interchangeable though, since written rhymes are sometimes used in battles, and freestyles are often simple demonstrations of ability rather than direct competitions. Freestyle and battling perform the same function in hip-hop culture as Chaucer's storytelling competition does in *The Canterbury Tales*, dramatizing social tensions among rappers and showcasing different techniques and levels of ability. These systems were developed in response to the particular conditions of hip-hop's genesis.

Hip-hop first appeared in the mid-1970s in the Bronx borough of New York as a dance party phenomenon, the result of extreme creativity fostered under conditions of extreme poverty. Innovative DJs like Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa entertained crowds at block parties by playing a new style of music, blending together only the "break beat" or percussion breakdown sections of records selected from various musical genres. The point was to keep people dancing by never letting the beat stop or falter in intensity. Before rap lyrics were ever recorded, DJs would hook up microphones to their mixers and have someone (or themselves) hype up the crowd with simple rhymed phrases like "Throw your hands in the air, and wave 'em like you just don't care." These hype-men came to be known as MCs, for "Master of Ceremonies" or "Mic Controller" or Rakim's interpretation: "No mistakes allowed / 'Cause to me, MC means 'Move the Crowd.'" It was during this period in the mid- to late seventies that the core elements of hip-hop culture all appeared in the Bronx: turntablism, rapping, break-dancing, beat-boxing, and graffiti art, all characterized by the need to find outlets for creative energy (musical, lyrical, kinetic, percussive, artistic) using only the limited resources of the urban ghetto.

Hip-hop was intensely competitive from the beginning, with decibel battles between sound systems, b-boy battles among break-dancers, territorial battles among graffiti writers, battles over DJ skills, and lyrical battles for prestige among MCs. This was partly because the Bronx was a centre of gang activity in the seventies, and the performance battles of hip-hop culture were invented to take the place of physical encounters. Rappers began channelling other oral traditions such as signifying (insult contests) into their live performances, and the competitive atmosphere increased the pressure on rappers to distinguish their styles and be clever and innovative with their wordplay. There wasn't a culture of celebrity around the rappers yet, however; they were part of larger sound crews and their primary function was to support the DJs, who were the culture's real pioneers. There also wasn't much money in hip-hop in its embryonic phase, but there was

respect to be gained, and those crews with the most recognition were soon doing paid gigs at clubs.

And therefore every man this tale I telle,
Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle;

In 1979 the first commercially successful hip-hop record, “Rapper’s Delight,” was released as a single on the label Sugar Hill Gang. Up until “Rapper’s Delight,” the only way to make money from hip-hop was by performing live, but with that one song’s immense success there was an immediate shift in the aspirations of artists towards recording projects. There is still a lot of nostalgia in hip-hop culture today about this pre-commercial period when rappers were defined strictly by their live performance skills and not by their corporate promotional backing, but rap music’s pop-culture status remains a paradox that even the strictest purists can’t escape. Without “Rapper’s Delight” and the parade of commercial hits that followed, the phenomenon we call hip-hop wouldn’t necessarily still exist, or most people wouldn’t have heard of it. When rap was adopted by the popular music industry in full force throughout the eighties and beyond, it permanently changed the face of the culture, but surprisingly little of the essential elements of hip-hop’s foundation were altered. Instead, the sites of hip-hop cultural production were split loosely into two camps with different functions, underground and mainstream. The mainstream manifests itself whenever hip-hop crosses over successfully into mass media, while the underground maintains the same live performance aesthetic that defined the culture’s origins.

When I first started rapping I didn’t realize how crucial both freestyle and battling are to hip-hop culture. I started off simply writing rhymes and memorizing them, ready to recite to anyone who would listen. On a few occasions I would spout off in front of an MC about how I was an MC too, and I often got the same response: “You’re an MC? Okay, let’s hear you freestyle.” I would answer that I couldn’t do it, and would repeatedly be told, “If you can’t freestyle, you’re not an MC.” At the same time I started noticing this distinction in hip-hop lyrics as well; for instance, a New York MC called Wordsworth declares, “I’m from an environment where freestyle’s the requirement / I bought every album; then my parents had to hide the rent.” It was also repeated often in books on hip-hop: a rapper is someone who writes rhymes and memorizes and records them, while an MC has the

ability to write and memorize but can also freestyle and battle other MCs in a live setting. In other words, every MC is a rapper, but not every rapper is an MC. Live performances are inherently less profitable than selling records because of the physical limitations of the audience, so freestyle and battling skills alone are not usually enough to sustain a career in hip-hop. Instead, live performances function as a training ground for artists, who are expected to pay their dues before graduating to the recorded medium. MCs aren't required to continue battling and freestyling regularly once their music careers take off, but they must be *able* to demonstrate their skills if challenged. Constant battling is counter-productive when you're making records, so in this case the readiness is all. Some rappers naturally try to subvert this process, recording radio singles without building any live skills first, but MCs tend to denounce this as an unfair cop-out or shortcut, since they consider their skills harder won. On the other hand, some battle MCs never make the transition to becoming recording artists, and the greatest success comes from balancing live performance skills with record sales. This is where the tension arises between the underground and mainstream, and hip-hop culture is produced in the ebb and flow of this tension.

Hip-hop's underground and mainstream veins interact much like organisms in symbiosis, or like parts of the psyche. The underground functions as hip-hop's conscience, while the mainstream functions as its ego. The underground accuses the mainstream of selling out, and the mainstream accuses the underground of player hating. The underground provides the mainstream with talented new artists reluctantly eager to cross over, while the mainstream ensures hip-hop's dominance in the public media, keeping underground artists motivated by the distant promise of fame and fortune. Neither side can exist without the other. Anyone who complains about the negativity of rap—the violence, misogyny, and jewelry-obsessed materialism that have come to define the majority of mainstream artists' content—is in essence mistaking the mainstream for the culture as a whole. However, this is an illusion of visibility, like watching a summer blockbuster and instantly dismissing cinema as an inherently superficial art form. The reason MTV and Top 40 hip-hop are rife with criminality and the objectification of women is because gratuitous sex and violence are universally marketable subjects. This also explains the commercial success of pulp fiction novels, prime-time television, and Hollywood movies. Mainstream hip-hop is marketed and distributed entirely by a handful of profit-driven corporations, and they predictably guide mainstream artists' content in a profitable direction. This is a constant source of frustration for

underground MCs at the top of their game, as expressed in Immortal Technique's rant, "And now they say they wanna get me signed to the majors / If I switch up my politics and change my behaviour." However, many hip-hop fans would consider "signing to the majors" a betrayal in itself, regardless of content. Likewise, this is a constant source of frustration for commercially successful artists who don't feel like their content has suffered as much as their credibility simply for being popular, which prompts Wyclef to mock, "Hip-hop fans, you're like the woman in my house / No matter how loyal I am, you still have your doubts / Talkin' about, 'is he real in this relationship? / Or did he "go pop" and on the side get a mistress?"

For what man that is entred in a pley,
He nedes moot unto the pley assente.

Around the time I started learning about the role of freestyle battling in hip-hop culture, I also started watching live battles and freestyle performances in my hometown of Vancouver. I was aware that most rappers are supposed to cut their teeth freestyling in the schoolyard or on the corner, but I was insulated from this community during my first year as an MC (or proto-MC) since I didn't know many rappers. It also took me a while to accept the fact that I was going to have to learn to freestyle on demand if I wanted to get even a nod from other artists. Freestyle is a skill that seems nearly impossible when you first try it, and gets easier and easier as you practise, as with any instrument combining sound and rhythm, but it also requires a cognitive attention to meaning. Paradoxically, thinking too much about your words is totally paralyzing, so freestyle requires a balance between intense mental focus and absolute faith, allowing the words to come from somewhere unknown (either the subconscious or the spiritual realm, depending on your beliefs). This is also the source of traditional English dream poetry such as the Venerable Bede's account of Caedmon or Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," which is not rationally "composed" in a cognitive sense. Freestyle is not free from structure, however, only from pre-composition: its quality is determined by the ingenuity and harmony of the rhymes, and the way they react to the beat. There is an element of freestyle in all writing, in so far as every word is produced in a given moment, but solitary composition affords the option to edit and rearrange. Hip-hop freestyle, on the other hand, is a continuous linguistic flow that exists only in the moment and cannot be captured or revised; it is a live event that offers a cross-section of the performer's mental

landscape, history, personality, and skill level, revealing as much in the rhyme patterns and syntax as in the content of the words. Of course, it takes a trained ear to sort through it, but from the number of things I've surprised myself by saying in freestyles I imagine it could be of great use to psychologists, if anything is.

I remember feeling extremely discouraged at first by how awful I sounded. I can also remember a dream I had near the beginning of my experiments with freestyle (speaking of psychology). There was a bespectacled black Rastafarian hip-hopper with dreadlocks sitting on the hood of a car, and when I approached him he confronted me with the now-familiar, "Oh, you're an MC? Okay, let's hear you freestyle." My freestyle skills in the dream were equal to my skills in reality, virtually non-existent, and after a few awkward lines I stopped. Then he proceeded to demonstrate the possibilities of the art form, conjuring rhymes that rendered our surroundings in striking terms, using metaphors that defied anticipation, and twisting words and phrases into indescribable new forms. I remember thinking, in the dream, that I couldn't learn to freestyle that well if I spent the rest my life practising. I awoke with that same feeling of hopelessness, but later it occurred to me that on some level I had actually created *all* of the lyrics in my dream, both his and mine. Although I couldn't remember what was said, I was certain the words were real and intelligible, and I realized that this elusive ability was actually latent within me, perhaps within everyone. Soon my freestyle sessions took on the quality of uncovering something half-buried internally, rather than striving after something outside of myself. After all, I was already confident that I could write, and freestyle was just a matter of writing out loud, under pressure, much faster, continuously, while using rhyme and rhythm. It came slowly, but I built my confidence and my abilities in tandem, with Talib Kweli egging me on: "If you can talk you can sing, / If you can walk you can dance."

I was freestyling my head off (in private) by the time I launched into my thesis research in the autumn of 1999, but was still too green to enter real battles. I also resisted the idea of battling for a long time because I wanted to take a rhetorical stand against it as an MC. The first rhymes I wrote followed the standard "I/You" hip-hop formula where a phantom opponent (you) is insulted in contrast to one's own prowess (I), as in Lauren Hill's opening salvo in *The Score*: "Claimin' that you got a new style, / Your attempts are futile, / Oooh child, you're puerile, / Brain waves are sterile / You can't create; / You just wait to take my tape." This battle formula can be found in the majority of mainstream rap lyrics largely because most rappers

develop their techniques through underground competitions before getting a record deal. However, it felt awkward and illogical to me, since most raps are actually delivered to an audience rather than an opponent (and Lauren is probably not calling her fans puerile, although some rappers do). So I decided to break from tradition and began addressing my “you” to the audience if I used the word at all, in both my written rhymes and freestyles. This gave me a broader frame of reference in my content than the standard battle metaphors, but it also made it harder for me to get my head into battle mode when I finally tried to make the switch.

I can not se that arguments avayle:
 Thanne semeth it there moste be batayle

My initial ambivalence towards battling was transformed into pure reverence when I witnessed my first live event. It is impossible to capture the tension and excitement of a live battle in a mere description, but I can highlight some of the qualities that make it so fraught. Proper freestyle battles are rigidly structured, with time limits for the raps and clear standards of judgment. Competing MCs are usually organized into head-to-head battles in heats, eliminating half of the competitors in each round. In my first battle there were over fifty MCs signed up, so the organizers held a mass qualifying round right at the beginning to determine who would make the final three rounds (I did not). This sudden surge of interest was spurred by the release of Eminem’s semi-fictional biopic, *8 Mile*, which rekindled widespread interest in battling as an art form. Of course, battles still happened regularly before *8 Mile* came out, but I had never heard of fifty MCs signing up for one. It was proof that there were closet rappers everywhere.

Since the purpose of a battle is to test MCs and also to entertain hip-hop fans, the audience is always an integral part of the performance. At the beginning of a battle the host will usually announce something like this to the crowd: “If you feel what these guys are sayin’ you better make some noise for them, and if you think it’s weak, well, you better let ’em know it.” The invitation to participate effectively puts the audience in the judge’s seat, since battles are decided by crowd response. Rappers sometimes pack the crowd with their friends to bias the outcome, so a few individual judges are often designated to make a final call. However, judging also introduces the possibility of corruption into the battle arena, since it’s generally easier to bribe or influence an individual than a mob, which is why most MCs would rather lose to a biased crowd than a biased judge. Despite this slight grey

area, in 99 percent of battles the judges go with the crowd, and the winner is usually obvious to everyone. It is also the audience's belief in their own supremacy that spurs them to participate, and it is the MCs' subjection to the crowd's will that keeps them humble and at the same time gives them their confidence. This confidence comes from the knowledge that there is no elusive essentialist standard by which your raps will be judged in a battle; there is only you, your opponent, and the crowd. Win the crowd and you win the contest. Winning the crowd is harder than it sounds, however, since hip-hop crowds are notoriously hostile to performers. There is no appreciation given for effort or good intentions, only a frank and raucous appraisal of each MC's entertainment value from moment to moment. To win a battle you have to draw on a combination of quick thinking, rhythmic delivery, cleverness, and confidence, all live on stage while being analyzed and insulted by your opponent. If you falter, stutter, or fail to be generally entertaining, the crowd will take the opportunity to loudly heckle you off stage, interrupting you even before your minute is up.

The thing that makes freestyle battling such an effective test of an MC's ability is that it is virtually impossible to fake. Once MCs get on stage it quickly becomes obvious whether or not they are able to compete, because of the intense pressure applied by the audience. Occasionally rappers will attempt to pass their written rhymes off as freestyles in a battle, but this is an old trick and the crowd is always looking for it. Battle freestyles have to use the immediate setting as a source of material, by rhyming on the opponent's name and appearance, and especially by responding to things that were said in the last rap. This serves as a test of MCs' ability to focus and think on their feet, which increases the entertainment value of the performance; it also signifies to the crowd that the rhymes aren't regurgitated. If an MC is battling with lines that sound too abstract, or the rhyme schemes are too obviously structured, the crowd will often harangue and make a gesture in the air like a pen writing, calling, "Booooo! Written! Written!" I have seen MCs get disqualified from battles because their rhymes, while effective in every other way, were exposed by the crowd's response as pre-written.

For soothly, he that precheth to hem that listen nat
heeren his wordes, his sermon hem anoieth.

The result of this heavy scrutiny and the structured simplicity of the battle format is that most rappers, like myself, eventually have to concede

that the only way to win battles is to practise obsessively and build your skills until you have the confidence and command of language necessary to perform under those conditions. There is no way to circumvent the paying of dues in this context, which ensures that only those who are serious about being hip-hop artists can succeed, although even with commitment there is no guarantee. In a battle you can't expect the crowd's indulgence just because you are exposing them to your personal art, nor can you attribute a hostile response from the crowd to their lack of taste, or insightfulness, or discernment. These are excuses that have exposed countless audiences to stupefying drivel at the hands of inept performers, whatever the genre. In a battle the only valid definition of taste, skill, authenticity, originality, craftsmanship, quality, genius, or any other criteria that we use to distinguish great art from mediocre, all flows directly from the crowd in the moment of the performance, and anyone with enough talent and dedication can capture this current. It is also irrelevant what you have achieved in the past, how rich you are, what colour you are, or what your reputation is; all that matters is how you perform. Evidence, one of the MCs from Dilated Peoples, says it best: "Fuck what you've done; if you've got skills, reveal it."

There is something appealing about the inherent fairness of this system. No one planned or designed it; it simply evolved along with hip-hop culture as a way to test the skills and dedication of artists, preventing posers and amateurs from dominating the stage. The reason this mechanism evolved is obvious: there were simply more people who wanted to be rappers than there were people willing to support them. This is described by Pras of the Fugees in terms of a competition for resources: "Too many MCs, not enough mics." The existence of freestyle battling and live performance as a necessary trial for underground MCs acts as a form of natural selection or quality control for hip-hop culture as a whole, demanding a level of commitment from artists that isn't imposed by the recording industry. Record companies don't care whether their artists can battle, only whether they sell records. Reciprocally, underground hip-hop heads care more about an artist's skills and authenticity than about Sony's profit margin. Freestyle and battling evolved in response to local challenges, namely the disproportionate number of aspiring rappers; however, the unintended result has been an impressive talent pool that contributes to hip-hop's continued dominance of the music industry and global popular culture. This relationship also steeps hip-hop culture in the ideal of meritocracy, where creativity is rewarded and fraud is punished. Of course, this ideal is constantly frustrated and perforated in reality by record companies and the market-driven mainstream media responsible for

broadcasting the message, but this only feeds into the underground's commitment to self-determination.

As I gradually came to understand the function of freestyle battling and live performance in hip-hop culture, I also began reading Chaucer's poetry through the lens of my experience. The result was that it became impossible for me to conceive of Chaucer outside of the context of what I was learning about hip-hop. I viewed live hip-hop shows as field research, and my close readings of Chaucer as lab work. Whether you attribute it to the power of positive thinking or to the pattern-recognition neurosis that plagued John Nash, I found exactly what I was looking for in *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer seems to have designed his pilgrim storytelling contest around the exact same principles and guidelines that govern hip-hop's underground, and I believe he uses these devices for the exact same function they perform in hip-hop culture. I would even argue that Chaucer *anticipates* hip-hop in a number of important ways, by dramatizing live performance and competition explicitly in his content, by drawing attention to different stylistic choices, and by raising questions about the poet's place in society at large, all within the playful context of a fictional game.

In the *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer establishes the setting, introduces his characters, and sets up the framework for everything that follows. He tells us that he was resting at a Southwark inn, near London, preparing to leave the next day on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, when a group of twenty-nine other pilgrims arrived at the inn with the same purpose. By the end of that day, Chaucer tells us, he has already spoken to each of these pilgrims and learned virtually everything about them, and he goes on to describe their history, appearance, and personality, one by one. There is an element of magic realism in this narrative already (or simply tall-tale telling), since the details Chaucer gives are more complex than anyone could possibly have learned from an afternoon of conversations, no matter how sharp their networking skills. This will not be the last time he makes use of his fictional licence for the purpose of the story. Once the pilgrims have been introduced, we meet the innkeeper, described as a large man, bold and impressive, whom Chaucer refers to as "our Host" throughout. The Host proposes a game for the "sport" and "comfort" of the journey, a storytelling contest in which each pilgrim will tell a tale as they ride along (actually the proposed scope of the work has each pilgrim telling two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back for a total of 120 tales, but Chaucer died before completing them all and never revised the introduction). According to the Host, the stories must be "aventures that

whilom han bifalle,” (things that happened in the past), and whoever “bereth hym best of alle” (performs the best) will win the prize, which is a “soper at our aller cost” (a free meal). The criteria for judging the tales will be based on two factors, “best sentence” and “moost solaaas” (most solace), which is generally taken to mean the tales with the most meaningful content and the most entertainment value. This balancing act between a story’s ability to edify and entertain is based on the old Latin maxim *delectare et docere* (to delight and to teach), a classical literary ideal that is returned to throughout the *Tales*. The Host also declares that he will join the pilgrimage and act as a judge for the contest, like the mediator of a freestyle battle. Chaucer even begins by calling the Host a “marchel in an halle,” or Master of Ceremonies (MC).

Though I right now sholde make my testament,
I ne owe hem nat a word that it nys quit.

The Knight opens the contest with an epic tale of chivalric romance, the longest and most complicated of *The Canterbury Tales*. When *The Knight’s Tale* finally ends, the Miller declares that he is going to “quite” the Knight, a word that in Chaucer’s time meant “respond to” or “pay back,” the root of our word “unrequited.” The Miller goes on to tell a tale in which the Knight’s themes are all reversed, chivalry is lampooned, and the rich old carpenter John is humiliated. This aggravates another pilgrim, the Reeve, who is a carpenter by trade, and he responds with a tale in which a miller is humiliated in a similar way. The Reeve claims self-defence: “[L]eveful is with force force of-showve” (it is right to respond to force with force). This theme of “quiting” is carried on throughout the tales, with rivalries cropping up among the pilgrims over their social standing, their personalities, and their conflicting views. Sometimes these rivalries are mediated and defused by the Host, and other times he seems to fuel them and stir up his own conflicts. As the journey unfolds, Chaucer usually remains in the background as an observer, telling us what the other pilgrims are saying and doing without getting himself involved.

“Quiting” is also one of the most important factors in a freestyle battle, since the crowd demands an interactive event, looking for constant evidence of improvisation. Although Chaucer never explicitly tells us whether the stories in *The Canterbury Tales* are being improvised or recited verbatim from memory, the presence of “quiting” in the text implies that at least the *choice* of tale is flexible, since each narrative may be required to

respond to the previous one. If they are meant to be improvised stories, it is obviously only within the fictional world Chaucer creates in the text, since text is relatively static by definition. This would make them like the scripted battles in *8 Mile*, which are not literally improvised but are meant to signify real freestyles within the fiction of the movie. Of course, the improvisation required of rappers in a freestyle battle is not expected to be absolute either. Many of the rhymes will have been used before in other freestyles or written songs, and common themes and refrains allow the mind to move from topic to topic without stumbling. What is required, however, is novelty in the word order within lines, and if material is being transplanted from other performances it must fit the specific context of the battle, proving that the rapper can interact with his environment. This is also the way storytellers have traditionally functioned in oral cultures throughout history, constantly retelling old stories with new words, improvising only in the details. One of the only published links I found between hip-hop and European oral traditions in my research was an essay comparing hip-hop freestyle to Homer's versification techniques in *The Iliad*, both of which require the poet to master a range of rhythmic and descriptive patterns within which to fit their improvised lines. This is precisely how I read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; the pilgrims are telling familiar stories of the past, but the individual lines and rhymes are being improvised, at least fictionally. This is much more believable from the perspective of verisimilitude as well, since it is much easier to learn the general plots of stories than it is to memorize them word for word.

Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe
Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce

To get a better sense of Chaucer's treatment of oral traditions in *The Canterbury Tales*, it is important to consider his historical context. Chaucer was writing in the latter part of the fourteenth century, which was a transitional period for poetry in medieval English society. Court records show that up until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, minstrels were regularly receiving aristocratic support for their services as both musicians and storytellers, so that poetry and music were inextricably linked during this time. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, there is a well-documented change in the social function of minstrels, who were specializing into a more narrowly defined role as musicians and singers, rather than poets and storytellers. Of course, many minstrels may have

continued to compose and perform poetry, but there is virtually no further record of them being paid for this service, only for their music. One explanation that has been offered for this shift is the rise of what Richard Firth Green calls the “household poet.” As medieval culture generally grew more literate, aristocratic households were increasingly filled with amateur poets whose performances placed them in competition with the minstrels who had traditionally monopolized the role of oral storyteller. Gradually this trend caused the mystique to disappear from the poet’s role, since poetry was now practised so commonly it was no longer worth paying for. Minstrels survived this transformation by increasingly specializing as musicians, for which they were still in high demand, but poetry became something far more communal and democratic, open to anyone who cared to join in, as opposed to an exclusive class of trained professionals.

One of the most dramatic effects of this trend was a collapse of the sense of separation that had once defined the relationship between poet and audience. Minstrels had previously enjoyed a certain aura of mystery around their status as performers and guardians of social and spiritual tradition, similar to oral storytellers in pre-literate cultures. In contrast, the amateur household poets who succeeded them were far less privileged, since any member of the audience might also be a performer waiting to participate. As a result poetry became a more accessible activity, but at the same time there was less assurance of quality, leaving it up to the audience to decide what was acceptable. Also, with the barriers broken down, the audience now had far more freedom to provide instant feedback, which increased the pressure on poets to meet a certain performance standard or suffer the consequences. One important outcome of these combined factors was an increase in competition among amateur poets, which found its expression in various literary games, such as riddles and verse improvisation contests.

Another important effect of this shift was that poetry became more closely associated with writing as opposed to the spoken word. While minstrels were expected to improvise and recite without any text on hand, the amateur household poet was a versifier who wrote his lines down. Of course, writing was still understood as a blueprint for recitation and poetry was generally read out loud, but the increased use of text certainly had an effect on the poet’s imagined reception (a.k.a. ego), which could now include absent readers as well as present listeners. Chaucer’s was a manuscript culture, which combined elements of the oral with elements of the textual; however, the printing press was still over a century away and manuscripts were far more

expensive than most people could afford. There was an inherent conflict in the fact that this move towards text happened at a time when poetry was no longer a paid vocation. The only way for a poet to produce a manuscript was to gain the recognition necessary to have it paid for by a wealthy patron, and this was rare. The relationship between written and spoken poetry in Chaucer's time was therefore analogous to the relationship between hip-hop's mainstream and underground components today. Record labels now function as the patrons who support artists with sufficient recognition among their peers, and hip-hop albums, like manuscripts, are meant to capture the essence of the oral performances that preceded them, and stand as a blueprint for the performances to come. Poets with a patron in the fourteenth century also had less freedom to choose their content, like artists signed to a major label, since the patron would commission poems on certain prescribed subjects (such as their own magnificence). So was Chaucer underground or mainstream? Of all the records of his life that survive, there is not one that refers to Chaucer as a professional poet, and there is no direct evidence that he was ever paid for his writing. However, there is ample evidence from the writing of his contemporaries, and from his own ironic self-references, that Chaucer was the most respected and prolific poet of his time writing in the English language.

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.

The changing relationship between poets and their audiences that followed the displacement of minstrels by household poets is dramatized more clearly in *The Canterbury Tales* than in any other medieval text. None of the pilgrims enjoys a position of privilege over the others when it comes to telling their story. Of course, some pilgrims are treated more respectfully than others on the surface because of their social standing, but the tale-telling contest serves as a great leveller and subverter of the social hierarchy within the text. The Knight is from the highest social class, and he is "quited" by the Miller, who is among the lowest. As in a freestyle battle, the quality of the tales is rated only through the response of the audience, and a few of the performances are actually interrupted in mid-line because they are deemed unworthy to finish. Throughout the contest the Host functions alternately as the mediator and spokesman for the group, although he

doesn't monopolize debate. This raises the same questions of bias as appointed judges in a freestyle battle, but in this case Chaucer was probably just using the Host as his fictional audience's mouthpiece for the sake of simplicity, saving him the trouble of thirty speeches after each performance. This is implied when he says "oure Hoost hadde the wordes for us alle" and also by the fact that none of the pilgrims ever contradicts anything the Host says about a tale. The function of audience feedback takes its most extreme form in the episode surrounding Chaucer's own submission to the storytelling contest, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.

Throughout the frame story of *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer remains mostly invisible as a witness, but at one point the Host notices him and calls him forward, demanding a tale. Although Chaucer certainly had a reputation in England as a great poet by the time of its composition, within the fiction of the text he is anonymous until the Host summons him: "What man artow?" All of the other pilgrims are named after their profession, so Chaucer would perhaps bear the title of "the Poet," but the beauty of his irony lies in its self-deprecation, and this scene is his masterpiece. The Host introduces Chaucer to the other pilgrims with a series of insults: "Thou lookest as thou wouldest find an hare, / For evere upon the ground I se thee stare" (Chaucer is staring meekly at the ground as if he is looking for a rabbit, a sure sign of stage fright). He goes on to mock Chaucer's appearance: "He in the waast is shape as wel as I; / This were a popet in an arm t'enbrace / For any womman" (He has a fat belly, like a puppet on a woman's arm), and also his shyness and mysteriousness: "He semeth elvyssh by his countenance, / For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce" (He is so antisocial that he seems like an elf or a fairy). The Host then commands Chaucer to "tell us a tale of mirth," and Chaucer's humble response is, "[O]ther tale certes kan I noon, / But of a rym I lerned longe agoon" (I don't know any stories except for this one rhyme I learned long ago). Chaucer's claim that he only knows one story could be seen as a deliberate deception of the Host, but this is unlikely since the episode that follows would make it an uncharacteristically prolonged deception. Instead, Chaucer the master storyteller is presenting his fictional character within the text as a total amateur, and the tale he goes on to tell is deliberately crafted to stand out as the most pathetic entry in the competition.

On the surface *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is obviously meant to be a parody of bad poetry. It is overwrought and pretentious with an excess of pointless details, shallow caricatures instead of dynamic characters, and a plot that meanders about without really progressing. It is divided into short stanzas

with irregular metre and trite rhymes that scholars have demonstrated by comparison to be below Chaucer's usual versifying standards. One characteristic passage reads:

Sire Thopas wax a doughty 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 certain
He hadde a semely nose.

(Sir Thopas was a tough customer
His face was white as French bread
His lips red as rose
His complexion was like fine red cloth
And I can tell you truly
He had an elegant nose.)

The content of the poem is manifestly shallow, its point deriving from its pointlessness, but Chaucer is still saying a great deal stylistically. *Sir Thopas* stands out in that it is the only one of the *Canterbury Tales* to be told in tetrameter tail-rhyme stanzas (lines with four alternating stresses combined with shorter lines), which was the favoured format of the metric romances popular in England for most of the fourteenth century, a style closely associated with minstrelsy. Chaucer is using this sing-song style to parody other poets and minstrels, but there may be an implied self-criticism as well, since he himself used tetrameter in most of his early verse. The significance of this contrast also lies in the continental European influences behind the two forms. Like most of Chaucer's earlier poems, the tetrameter of the English metric romance tradition was derived from French sources, but later in his career Chaucer encountered the poetry of the Italians, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who were all writing in iambic pentameter (lines with five alternating stresses). Chaucer imported this form from Italy and adapted it to the cadences of Middle English, a great innovation for which he had no previous English models. Iambic pentameter couplets are less restrictive and thus better suited to narrative verse than the old tetrameter form, and once Chaucer made the switch he never returned, with the prominent exception of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.

This sudden change in technique leaves the reader wondering what kind of joke Chaucer is trying to pull, since he seems to have affected a kind of prescient quixotic madness over a century before Cervantes. The story

stumbles along as Sir Thopas dreams of an elf queen and goes prancing (Chaucer repeatedly uses the verb “pricking”) through the fields to find her. He meets a three-headed giant called “Sir Oliphaunt,” who challenges him to a duel, but he retreats back to town to drink and listen to minstrels with his friends. The climax comes as Sir Thopas is preparing to return for the duel, when the poem is interrupted in mid-line, “Til on a day –” and the Host cuts in rudely with the verdict:

“Namooore 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,” quod he.

(“No more of this, for God’s sake,”
 Said the Host, “you make me
 So weary of your utter vulgarity
 That, God forgive me,
 My ears hurt from your crappy speech.
 I condemn this rhyme to the devil!
 This may well be rhyme doggerel.”)

Mercifully, Chaucer has returned to his trademark iambic pentameter couplets for the Host’s response, a form that feels comparatively refreshing after the cluttered rhymes of *Sir Thopas*. Carrying on the dramatic irony, Chaucer acts wounded and defensive:

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

(“Why won’t you let me
 Tell my tale like the others,
 Since it’s the best rhyme I know?”)

This provokes a further attack from the Host:

“By God,” quod he, “for pleynly, at a word,
 Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!
 Thou doost noght elles but despendest tyme.
 Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme.”

(“By God, because, in a word,
 Your crappy rhyming isn’t worth a turd!
 You’re doing nothing but wasting time.
 You shall no longer rhyme.”)

This scene is so reminiscent of a hip-hop battle that I find it hard to believe it’s over six hundred years old. Virtually everything the Host says to Chaucer can also be found in combative hip-hop lyrics. For example, Talib Kweli parallels the criticism of Chaucer’s time-wasting and poor rhyming skills: “I don’t get on stage and waste your time, / MCs got a lot to say, but they just can’t rhyme.” Eminem echoes the sentiment about empty speech: “Nowadays everybody wanna talk like they got somethin’ to say / But nothin’ comes out when they move their lips / Just a bunch of gibberish,” as does Pharoah Monch: “A million MCs and they ain’t sayin’ nothin’!” The claim that Chaucer’s rhymes aren’t worth a turd has been reiterated in practically every battle I’ve ever witnessed.

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, enforce thee nat to speke.”

When the Host says to Chaucer, “Thou shalt no longer rhyme,” it seems like his turn must be over, but then the Host’s speech takes on a conciliatory tone:

“Lat se wher thou kanst tellen aught in geeste,
 Or telle in prose somewhat, at the leeste,
 In which ther be som murthe or som doctrine.”

(“Let’s see if you can use alliteration,
 Or tell us something in prose at least,
 In which there is some mirth or meaning.”)

As punishment for his ineptitude in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, Chaucer is barred not from speaking, but from rhyming, and he is given the option to continue using either prose or alliteration (repetition of the first letter or sound in each word). Chaucer then goes on to tell *The Tale of Melibee*, a prose tract on compassion and good governance. The Host seems to be identifying a formal hierarchy within the storytelling competition, with rhymes representing the most difficult and thus the highest form, followed by alliteration, and finally prose, which is rated “at the leeste.” This

hierarchy is based on the complexity of each form's constituent parts, since rhymes use whole words for their effect, alliteration uses only one or two letters, and prose represents a complete forfeiture of verse structure. The idea of free verse would have been completely absurd to Chaucer, or he would have simply recognized it as a form of obscure prose broken up into shorter lines.

The scene that follows *The Tale of Sir Thopas* dramatizes many of the formal debates Chaucer would have encountered as a poet during the later part of the fourteenth century. "Geeste" or alliterative verse was the native form used in Old English texts like *Beowulf*, and was associated with the oral tradition transmitted by minstrels and the storytellers that Chaucer refers to as "geestours for to tellen tales." Rhyme had already started to usurp the place of alliteration in English poetry, but there was an alliterative revival in the fourteenth century, represented by *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight* and *Piers Ploughman*, so it was certainly a form still available for Chaucer to use. However, the only sustained use of alliteration in all of Chaucer's writing occurs in *The Knight's Tale*, where he draws 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." Here Chaucer is paying tribute to the most resilient feature of alliteration: its aptitude for describing violence. But the absence of alliteration in virtually all of his writing suggests a deliberate position against it on Chaucer's part, perhaps because he considered it an archaic form or perhaps because he simply took more pleasure in rhyme.

The intersection of forms in this scene also allows Chaucer to draw attention to different rhyming techniques, to great ironic effect. The tetrameter romance rhymes criticized by the Host are meant to parody the older minstrel style that Chaucer had used himself in his earlier work, a style that was still being used by practically every other rhyming poet in England at the time. The iambic pentameter couplets employed in the scene itself and in the bulk of *The Canterbury Tales* were Chaucer's own innovation, and stand out as an obviously superior narrative form in comparison to *Sir Thopas*. The reason for this is obvious; the addition of two extra syllables in each line allows for more variation in stress and therefore more metrical freedom in telling a story, without losing the coherence between rhymes. Thus, by insulting and mocking his fictional pilgrim character within the text, Chaucer is ironically pointing to the success of his own work in comparison to everyone else's. He is subtly challenging both alliterative poets and metrical romance poets, intensifying the battle ethos.

Sir Thopas is also key to understanding *The Canterbury Tales* because of what it tells us about the fictional competition among the pilgrims. The story is used to set an example for the others, showing everyone in no uncertain terms what happens to a poet who fails to please his audience. When the Host tells Chaucer that his replacement tale must have some “mirth or some doctrine,” this goes back to the original criteria of “sentence” and “solaas” established in the *General Prologue*. Evidently *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is terminated because it fails to be either enjoyable or enlightening. The Host’s aggravated outburst is essentially a dramatization of every performing poet’s worst fear, the fear of an audience rebellion. It is also an acknowledgement of the new relationship between poets and audiences that followed the popularization of poetry in the Middle Ages. Chaucer may cut a pathetic figure in the *Sir Thopas* episode, but I think he is actually paying tribute to the necessary functions of competition and audience feedback, which combine to increase the pressure on poets to build their skills, exactly like battling in hip-hop culture. The purpose of *Sir Thopas* is to enrich the overall quality of the material by offering itself in contrast to the other *Tales* and also through the implicit pressure to perform it puts on the other pilgrims. Chaucer’s decision to deliver the worst tale himself within this fictional competition is thus an ironic act of altruistic self-sacrifice, like the rabbit that stops and beats the ground with its foot to warn the others of a predator’s approach, only to be devoured.

Thou liknest it also to wilde fyr;
 The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir
 To consume every thing that brent wole be.

Sir Thopas serves to remind the pilgrims that the game they are playing has rules and stakes, but Chaucer is also pointing to the principles that govern the natural and social sciences. Chaucer’s poetry is filled with references to history, philosophy, medicine, alchemy, and astronomy, and there is no doubt that he had an inquiring mind; however, what I find most interesting is not what he knew, but what he anticipated. For instance, Chaucer’s treatment of audience feedback in *The Canterbury Tales* could be seen as a foreshadowing of the recent findings around the action of feedback loops. A feedback loop is any cycle or system in which some part of the output is returned to the beginning, affecting further output. Feedback loops have been identified by researchers in virtually every field, from population ecology and behavioural psychology to economics and political

science. These feedback loops come in two distinct forms, positive and negative. Positive feedback loops amplify themselves indefinitely, since their output increases their input, which in turn further increases their output. The classic positive feedback loop is the whine of microphone feedback through a power amplifier. An excellent literary example of a positive feedback loop occurs in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when Hamlet describes his parents' relationship before his father's murder: "Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on." I have witnessed positive feedback loops at work in battles many times: when a rapper falters or misses a word the crowd's jeering will cause him to lose concentration and commit further errors, which will provoke more hostility from the crowd and so on. These conditions often cause otherwise talented rappers to fail completely in the battle arena. Reciprocally, positive feedback loops can lead just as quickly to success, as the cheers of the crowd increase the rapper's confidence, which leads to a more impressive performance and thus to more cheering. This gives a double meaning to the term "positive feedback," but positive feedback loops are generally associated with negative effects, since they quickly lead to the extremes of either complete implosion or gross over-inflation.

The second model is the negative feedback loop, which has a stabilizing rather than an amplifying effect. A negative feedback loop is defined in *The Academic Press Dictionary of Science and Technology* as "Any control system in which feedback is used to compare actual performance with a standard representing the desired performance." This is an exact description of the Host's feedback within *The Canterbury Tales*. The actual performance of each pilgrim is measured against the performance desired by the highly demanding audience, a form of quality control. When feedback exists, poets are forced to anticipate it by submitting themselves to the audience's will, which increases their effectiveness as performers. When feedback is absent, poets are free to imagine themselves as being effective regardless of what anyone else thinks, which results in a general deterioration of the audience's experience. Given the obvious advantages to the audience (and to the overall quality of the poetry), it is not surprising that Chaucer put such an emphasis on audience feedback in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Another idea that Chaucer seems to have anticipated with his system of competition and feedback in *The Canterbury Tales* is Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural selection. Chaucer's ideas about poetry resulted from observing the interactions between poets and their audiences in England in the fourteenth century. He realized that the poetic

techniques available showed considerable variation in their effectiveness in pleasing an audience, which resulted in different levels of success in terms of the survival of each performance under the potential hostility of audience feedback. Chaucer was also aware that literary trends are inherited through the influence of poets on future generations of poets, as stories are passed on through translation and adaptation. Each generation's challenge lies in adapting the universal stories and themes of the past into a context that is acceptable to the audience of the present. Both Darwin and Chaucer recognized competition as the key to growth and development, and sought a framework within which positive results could be distinguished from negative, and competitive energy could be harnessed for individual success *and* overall progress. Chaucer's area of interest was different from Darwin's, but the insight that produced *The Origin of Species* is also present in *The Canterbury Tales*, the definitive manual for the function of poets in society.

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:

The storytelling competition that Chaucer employs as his framing device tells us a great deal about the different types of poetry that influenced him, but it also raises the question of his own influence on others. By the end of his life Chaucer was well aware of his growing reputation, and he must have considered the impact of his ideas and techniques on his imitators and inheritors. By assigning audience feedback and competition central roles in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is addressing one of the main problems threatening the future of his craft. The storytelling torch had recently passed from the hands of specialized minstrels into the hands of anyone who cared to participate. This democratization process carried the danger of diluting poetry into irrelevance, but also the potential of diversifying and revitalizing it. The key difference between these two outcomes lay in maintaining a direct connection between poetry and its listening audience. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has created a fictional world in which all members of society, from the lowliest Cook to the primmest Prioress, are potentially capable of producing excellent narrative poetry upon demand.

The *Tales* succeed to various degrees in delighting the audience and teaching them something, while still celebrating each pilgrim's distinct perspective. Also, the presence of a potential reward for outstanding performance, "a soper at our aller cost," provides a necessary incentive to excel: the most deserving poets will be generously supported by society. However, the pilgrims who fail to deliver are equally important to this fictional world, since they reveal the mechanism through which the utopian effect has been achieved. The tyranny of the audience is introduced as a populist solution to the tyranny of inept performers. This mechanism works as a form of fictional quality control within the text, but it can also be seen as a prescription for the future of English literature as a whole, a way of encouraging poets to innovate and excel. *The Canterbury Tales* was Chaucer's blueprint for building towards a continually evolving ideal of literature.

So what happened? How did poetry go from the model Chaucer put forward—competitive, descriptive, rhyming narrative verse—to the printed free verse that we call poetry today? Even more importantly, how did poetry evolve from its roots in popular entertainment and communal play into something elitist and inaccessible, virtually irrelevant to most people's lives? The changes in poetry's form and social function over the past six centuries were introduced piecemeal by generations of poets experimenting with different styles, each movement influencing the next. Complex as they were, these changes were all stimulated by one momentous paradigm shift in technology: the invention of the printing press. In Chaucer's time poetry could not be separated from its sense of a listening audience, since its primary purpose was to be recited; even verse written in a manuscript was understood as a representation of an oral event to be used for communal recitation. Communitality was necessary because hand-written manuscripts were laborious and expensive to produce. However, after Guttenberg's printing press arrived in England about eighty years after Chaucer's death, reading and writing were further democratized by the reduced cost of mass production. Along with writers in every other genre, poets gained access to a much broader potential readership, which completely changed the way they imagined their place in society. The elements of live performance, competition, and audience feedback that Chaucer considered crucial to the development of poetic technique were eventually replaced by the editorial whims of publishers catering to niche markets, a form of artificial selection. This exchanged one set of environmental factors for another, but it was a Faustian bargain that cost poets their sense of connection to a live listening audience. The changes took hold so slowly and the immediate benefits of

print were so numerous that this expense passed virtually unnoticed—most poets had no problem giving up ten listeners in exchange for the potential of a thousand readers.

Stylistic choices necessarily anticipate the reception of any work of art, and when poets exchanged their listening audience for a silent readership this also affected the relationship between verse form and its function. In the sixteenth century, Philip Sidney raised this question in his *Defense of Poesy*, in which he rejects verse form as a defining quality of poetry: “[B]eing but an ornament and no case to poetry, since there have been many most excellent poets that never versified, and now swarm many versifiers that need never answer to the name of poets.” The “excellent poets who never versified” were all foreign and classical figures writing in other languages, however, while poetry in English had previously been structured by definition. Completely unrhymed poetry in English first appeared in sixteenth-century drama in the form of blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), which was used by Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare. Going one step further, John Milton attached a preface to his blank verse masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, denouncing rhyme as “the Invention of a barbarous Age” and an unnatural impediment to great poetry. William Wordsworth’s *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* also sought to “naturalize” poetry and carve away the “elevations of style” that had characterized eighteenth-century verse. Although the *Ballads* themselves made extensive use of rhyme, in 1802 Wordsworth had no problem writing, “[T]he language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good prose.” The crossbreeding potential of prose and poetry was fully explored a few decades later in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, which rejected both rhyme and metre and ushered in an era that extends to the present day, defined by the dominance of free verse. Whitman’s influence can be found in W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and virtually every significant modernist poet of the twentieth century. Of course, there were no laments being sung for the death of rhyme; instead, free verse was heralded as the final liberation of poetry from the unnatural burden imposed by the repressive structure of rhyme and rhythm.

I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettre,
Ne, God woot, rym holde I but litel bettre

The idea that devices like rhyme and rhythm are unnatural to poetry would have been ridiculous in Chaucer’s time, since they were precisely

what distinguished poetry from prose; you might as well have said alcohol was unnatural to beer, ruining an otherwise perfectly good beverage. Over the centuries, poets who defended and employed rhyme were preserving the English literary tradition going back to well before Chaucer, and poets who rejected rhyme were trying to break from that tradition and adapt to the times, and to the conditions of print culture. Of course, poetry never stopped being recited out loud; this simply ceased to be its primary function, which transformed the sound qualities of poetry from defining characteristics into mere superficial ornaments to be gradually dispensed with. Some poets struggled hard against this trend, but the greater financial incentives offered by publishing constantly acted as a selective force, favouring increased freedom of expression and the eventual rejection of all structure in verse. The process was perpetuated by both writers and readers; after all, if rhyming feels quaint and old-fashioned to poets then it will certainly feel that way to their readers, and vice versa. One result was a gradual merging of prose and poetry, once formal distinctions, which became more and more subjectively defined as they grew together. The other result was that poetry went from being a source of entertainment and communal play to being an academic discipline, practised by educated people for the gratification of other educated people in the name of abstract literary principles with measurements of quality separate from the experience of the rapidly diminishing audience. This separation has led to an unhealthy reverence at staged readings of published poems, which are often assumed to be so elusive and precious in value that the audience must be stupid for not getting anything from the listening experience. In most cases, however, the emperor is naked.

The changes in literary style that gradually followed the rise of print culture were also perpetuated by historical and political factors. The false reverence currently afforded published free verse is a consequence of the audience's alienation from the creative process, but it also has roots in the social upheavals of the nineteenth century. In the wake of the French Revolution, and with the rise of skepticism from the likes of Hume and Voltaire, poets were hailed as the only possible redeemers of bankrupt social and religious institutions. Percy Shelley declared poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the World," and one of the most influential thinkers of the time, Thomas Carlyle, prophesied a future where poetry would replace religion: "Literature is but a branch of Religion, and always participates in its character: however, in our time, it is the only branch that still shows any greenness; and, as some think, must one day become the main stem." This

re-privileging of poets as the keepers of society's political and spiritual identity hailed back to the minstrels of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who had enjoyed the validation of wealthy patrons—secular and religious—as well as the general populace. However, modern poets failed to fulfill this promise; since they had lost their public voice and no longer had an audience to legitimize them, they continued their retreat into academia.

While historical and political factors do exert an influence on literary trends, often these trends can ultimately be traced to changes in technology. Video killed the radio star; photography killed realism in the visual arts; and the printing press killed rhyme. Thanks to human ingenuity and creativity, each of these deaths has also led to the birth of new art forms and new styles, but sometimes an invention can have an unexpected revitalizing effect on a lost tradition as well. The resurrection of rhyme that hip-hop culture has achieved in three short decades was enabled by the invention of recorded sound by Thomas Edison in 1877. The importance of sound is diminished in a printed poem, so poets naturally responded by shifting their emphasis away from sound and onto nuances of meaning, discarding rhyme and rhythm and other remnants of the oral tradition in the process. This was partially in consideration of the fact that readers appreciate different qualities of a poem than listeners, as implied by Margaret Atwood's comment, "I don't think what poetry does is express emotion. What poetry does is to evoke emotion from the reader, and that is a very different thing." As effective as Atwood and many other free verse poets can be in achieving this end, it is also a very different thing to evoke emotion from the *listener* (as opposed to the reader). However, the phonograph solved the problem created by the printing press, since it enabled both sound and text to reach the same potentially mass audience. This had wide-reaching implications for the direction poetry could take in terms of rhyme and rhythm. Before the invention of sound recording technology, the effect of rhyme had only ever been enjoyed in the form of an ethereal live performance, but now this effect could be captured and mass-produced. Hip-hop owes its success to many factors, but the ultimate factor is the medium of transmission. Recorded sound allows rappers to reach millions of people with their oral performances, imagining themselves in the context of posterity in a way that only published poets have done historically, as in Eminem's plea: "Just let our spirits live on / Through our lyrics that you hear in our songs." Edison may not have intended his invention to lead to the revitalization of rhyme as an art form, but it is somehow fitting that the first thing he recorded was the sound of himself reciting "Mary Had a Little Lamb," a rhyming poem.

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
 Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
 That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
 Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so

To understand what is happening in hip-hop right now with regard to rhyme, it is necessary to consider both the device's history and its general effect, a field referred to loosely as "rhyme theory." Rhyme in poetry has four recognized functions: mnemonic (memory), schematic (organization), melodic (sound), and semantic (meaning). All four of these functions of rhyme go back to the prehistoric roots of human oral traditions. Rhyme in this case would be more properly generalized as repetition, since all poetic devices, including rhyme, alliteration, consonance (repeated consonant sounds), assonance (repeated vowel sounds), metre, and even rhythm more generally, are all defined by the repetition of a particular sound or stress. Rhyme is simply the most complex form of this phenomenon of linguistic repetition, since it is based on entire words or syllables rather than on smaller parts of speech. Repetition provides a structure in which to set stories and myths, acting as a series of signposts or markers for the mind to follow. In other words, repetition uses sound to make connections between words and ideas that aren't necessarily connected in meaning, linking them through melody and rhythm. This was crucial to the function of storytellers in the oral tradition because it aided memorization and also allowed their words to harmonize with music. Before the written word was invented only about five thousand years ago, human culture was passed on from generation to generation almost entirely in the form of oral stories, so every culture on earth has its roots in these archetypal linguistic elements of memory and melody. The sound qualities of poetry embodied in rhyme and repetition resonate with us on an instinctual level partially because they are the qualities that formed our distant ancestors' first awareness of their place in the world.

Every culture and language on earth will have its own story about how the archaic roots of rhyme in the oral tradition have been transformed through the impact of writing and technology. The only one of these stories that I can contribute to at the moment is the story of the English language. The Germanic ancestor of English, which we call Old English, is first recognized as a distinct language about thirteen hundred years ago. Old English poetry, exemplified by *Beowulf*, is generally composed of lines with

four stressed syllables using alliteration rather than rhyme, with each line divided into two halves by a pause or “caesura.” However, rhyme was certainly known in England at this time, since it was used in Latin hymns in the church, so its absence from virtually all Old English poetry implies that it was deliberately avoided in favour of alliteration. Rhyme only appears in common use in English poetry after 1066, when the Norman conquest established French as the language of government and the aristocracy. Although the French poetry of the time was rhymed rather than alliterative, the Normans can’t be said to have “introduced” rhyme into England, since it was already there in other forms but was previously being ignored. One likely explanation lies in the differences in stress and inflection among Indo-European languages, which can limit the effectiveness of rhyme. Philip Sidney pointed this out in 1595 in his *Defense of Poesy*, and modern linguistics has recently expanded the picture. Old English was a Germanic language that expressed variations in the meaning of words by using unstressed suffixes. Since the effect of rhyme is based on stress, and on creating a sound connection between two words that aren’t otherwise connected in meaning, languages that express themselves with unstressed suffixes historically tend to avoid rhyme in favour of other forms of repetition. It is not hard to see why this is the case, since words like “seduced” and “created” don’t really rhyme even though they share the same endings. By contrast, the words “syntax” and “relax,” which also share only their last two letters, make for excellent rhymes because the endings are stressed and their common sound is coincidental to their meaning. Now try to imagine sustained rhyming in a language where unstressed suffixes were the norm instead of the exception. When Norman French mixed with Old English after 1066, it caused many of the Germanic unstressed suffixes to be abandoned, which led to much greater variation in syllable stress at the ends of words, making rhyme a more effective device. The resulting Middle English hybrid provided excellent raw materials for the crafting of rhyming verse, a potential that Chaucer was the first to fully explore.

The introduction of rhyme into English in the Middle Ages was made possible by changes in the language as it mixed with French, but there is some evidence to suggest that the use of rhyme also contributed to those changes. In surveys of the linguistic roots of words used in a variety of Middle English poetry, rhymes at the end of lines are more frequently found to be foreign imports than other words in the poem. This is because rhyme forces the poet to find a matching sound for each word, while still adhering to a certain story or subject. Given the unsuitability of many Old English

words to the requirements of rhyme, multilingual poets in the Middle Ages who were stuck for a word would often simply take one from French, Norse, Latin, or Italian. English at the time was a vernacular language with no standardized dictionary or index, so once the word was used in a poem written in English it would often be accepted later as an English word. This is yet another way in which rhyme is capable of producing meaning through the creative pressure it puts on poets; there are literally hundreds of words in common use that were adopted into the English language in this way. For example, the word “experience” appears for the first time in English as a rhyme in Chaucer’s poetry: “In wommen vinolent is no defence – / This knowen lecchours by experience.” There was no Old English word with a meaning exactly equivalent to “experience” in this context, nor was there a word with a similar sound, so Chaucer simply adopted the French *experience* as an English word to suit both his verse and his narrative requirements. Since the significance of words is often altered by different usages when they jump from one language into another, the meaning we associate with the word “experience” today owes something to the way Chaucer decided to use it in his rhyming practice (which happens to be the same as the French meaning). Using foreign words also allowed Chaucer to avoid the effect of obvious or trivial rhyme.

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
 That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
 On metres and on rymyng craftily,
 Hath seyde hem in swich Englissh as he kan

Of the four functions of rhyme—mnemonic, schematic, melodic, and semantic—only the semantic function is capable of losing its potency. Over-familiarity does not alter the value of a rhyme as a memory aid, as a marker of scheme (for instance, to distinguish sonnets from limericks), or as a sound effect. However, rhymes that are overused tend to lose their semantic value, unless poets can find creative ways of refreshing them. The reason for this terminal shelf life lies in the potential for meaning creation inherent in rhyme, which is a neurological function. In common speech we naturally connect words to one another through associations of meaning, which are based on perceived connections between the ideas or objects represented by the words. When a rhyme connects two words using an effect of sound, it forces us to think about those two words in a new way, creating a new synaptic connection between neurons in the brain, accompanied by a

pleasure response. This is the reason for the so-called “punch line” effect of rhyme, and the reason rhyme is often associated with humour. Like rhyme, humour often presents us with circumstances that seem to be separate and then finds an unexpected way of connecting them. Rhyme theorists generally agree that the more creative the semantic link between the two words used, the more effective the rhyme will be. This is also one reason why English is better suited to rhyme than most languages. Since English is cobbled together from more diverse foreign sources than any other contemporary language, its rhyming pairs are more likely to be based on semantic differences rather than common linguistic roots (such as suffixes), which increases the potential for meaning creation. When rhymes that have been used too often become predictable, such as “moon/june” and “true/blue,” the process of meaning-creation is subverted, replacing the delight of invention with the tediousness of routine.

Chaucer was the first poet to draw attention to this quality of rhyme. When the Host says to Chaucer, “This may well be rhyme dogerel,” this is the first written record we have of the final word, which means bad or trivial rhyming verse. Chaucer may have been using a common term or he may have invented it specifically for this scene, but either way *The Tale of Sir Thopas* remains the first definitive example we have of self-consciously awkward rhyming. So what is the difference between doggerel rhyme and effective rhyme? Some verse theorists have proposed that it is a quality of surprise that makes rhyme effective, which would seem to fit with the criteria of meaning creation, but if surprise were really primary then good rhymes would cease to impress after the second or third pass. This is manifestly not the case, however; a superbly crafted rhyme continues to produce the same effect indefinitely, sometimes even gaining potency with increased exposure. The quality of a rhyme must therefore be a creative essence captured by the poet in the moment of its composition, such that its effect can be conjured each time the words are brought to mind. In this case doggerel is not actually caused by over-familiarity with rhyme; instead, it is simply a product of ineptitude or laziness on the poet’s part in choosing semantic links that are too obvious. Granted, the more rhymes become familiar the greater the mind’s creative reach must be to keep their usage fresh, but the challenge lies in the inventiveness of poets, not in any innate quality of the device.

There are various techniques that poets have traditionally used to refine their rhyming practice, many of which can be traced back to Chaucer, the first great rhyme technician in English. One is simply a sense of mindfulness

about which rhymes are becoming too obvious to be effective without some kind of twist. For instance, a survey comparing Chaucer's rhymes for "knight" with two other metric romances of his time revealed 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 pairing that was commonly used by both of the other poets but found nowhere in any of Chaucer's writing is with "fight." Considering the obvious semantic link between knights and fights there is no chance this omission on Chaucer's part was a coincidence. Rather, it was the obviousness of the pairing that had caused it to be overused by other poets and thus avoided by Chaucer. Another of Chaucer's innovations was to end his sentences and clauses in the middle of lines rather than at the end, which allows the story to flow past the rhymes without pausing repetitively after each one. This can be seen in the *Prologue* to *Sir Thopas*: "Ye, that is good, / quod he; 'now shul we heere / som deyntee thing, me thynketh by his cheere.'" Chaucer's subtle arrangement prevents the rhyme "heere/cheere" from dominating the line's natural cadence, so that you hardly hear it unless it is deliberately emphasized. Comparisons have shown that other medieval poets are more prone to end each line with a punctuation mark, as if their thoughts were stumbling over the rhymes rather than gliding over them. Chaucer's technique shows a degree of sophistication beyond anything that came before him, and much of what came after, prompting Sidney to say of him in *The Defense of Poesy*: "I know not whether to marvel more, either that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age go so stumblingly after him."

Who koude ryme in Englyssh proprely?

Hip-hop artists employ all of Chaucer's techniques and more to maintain the vitality of their rhymes. They first expanded the range of possibility by using rhymes based on sound rather than spelling. Rhymes like the classic "love/prove" pairing are useless in hip-hop, which relies on common stressed vowel sounds rather than consonants, as in Lauren Hill's "create/wait/take/tape" combination. Sometimes words that ought not to rhyme at all are made to sound the same through deliberate mispronunciation, as in Eminem's "I shouldn't have to pay these shrinks / These eighty G's a week to say the same things tweece / Twice, whatever, I hate these things." However, the innovation that has had the widest-reaching impact on hip-hop lyrics is polysyllabic rhyme (also called "multi-

syllable rhyme” and “rhyming patterns” in the U.K.). Originally hip-hop employed strictly one- and two-syllable rhymes in masculine (e.g. *air/care*) and feminine (e.g. *lazy/crazy*) constructions, as in 1982’s “The Message” featuring Melle Mel: “Don’t push me ’cause I’m close to the edge / I’m tryin’ not to lose my head / It’s like a jungle sometimes; it makes me wonder / How I keep from goin’ under.” These two varieties had been the staple of rhyming verse in English for centuries, but hip-hop’s intensely competitive conditions produced a much faster rate of stylistic innovation. Polysyllabic rhyme was introduced to resolve rhyme’s tendency towards obsolescence. Since rhyme patterns can constantly be refreshed in the form of new arrangements, they are not exhaustible in the same way that monosyllabic rhymes are. The difference between monosyllabic and polysyllabic rhymes for versifiers is like the difference between addition and algebra for mathematicians, or between primary colours and blended pigments for painters.

The dominance of polysyllabic rhyme in hip-hop today is a cumulative result of decades of competitive one-upmanship, but there are three artists whose impact stands out. The first rapper to fully explore the potential of polysyllabic rhyme was Rakim in 1986, whose first song, “I Ain’t No Joke,” on his first album, *Paid In Full*, contained the lyrics:

Write a rhyme in graffiti and every show you see me in,
 Deep concentration, ’cause I’m no comedian.
 Jokers are wild; if you wanna be tame,
 I treat you like a child, and you’re gonna be named
 Another enemy, not even a friend of me
 ’Cause you’ll get fried in the end when you pretend to be
 Competin’, ’cause I just put your mind on pause
 And I complete when you compare my rhyme with yours.

Other rappers had occasionally experimented with polysyllabic rhyme before, but Rakim managed to develop it into a powerful and sustained flow, combining end rhyme combinations like “mind on pause / rhyme with yours” with constant internal rhymes like “competin’ / complete when.” It was as if he had broken rhyme down into its smallest constituent parts and built something greater out of them, and it had the effect of raising the bar for the next generation of rappers, who felt they had to try to match Rakim’s rhymes or admit defeat. This continued to reverberate until Nas upped the ante for rhyme complexity again in 1994 with *Illmatic*, taking Rakim’s concept to the next level by stretching repeated rhyme patterns in longer

sequences: “Packin’ like a Rasta in the weed spot / Vocals will squeeze glocks / MCs eavesdrop / Though they need not,” and also by filling lines with more complicated combinations of rhyme references: “When I attack there ain’t a army that could strike back / ’Cause I react never calmly on a hype track.” The bar was raised again in 1999 with Eminem’s *Slim Shady LP*, which got so much attention in the media for the controversial content that the innovations in form were generally overlooked, at least outside of hip-hop circles. Eminem, claiming Rakim as one of his main lyrical influences, combined polysyllabic rhymes in tighter and more prolonged series than anyone before him: “I feel like I’m walkin’ a tightrope without a circus net / Poppin’ Percaset / I’m a nervous wreck / I deserve respect / But I work a sweat / For this worthless cheque / I’m ’bout to burst this tech / In somebody to reverse this debt.” These three albums and many others transformed polysyllabic rhyme from an optional standing challenge for rappers into a virtual requirement that now permeates the lyrics of almost every song, mainstream and underground, at least in English. However, polysyllabic rhyme functions much like freestyling and battling in hip-hop culture: it doesn’t necessarily bring success, but it must be mastered and eventually integrated into an artist’s overall technique. It can be counter-productive to focus too obsessively on rhyme patterns while sacrificing clarity of content, but rappers must be *able* to draw on them effortlessly when needed, even in pursuit of lyrical simplicity. There is a difference between Picasso’s stick figures and the scribbling of an infant.

Diverse folk diversely they seyde,
But for the moore part they loughe and playde.

Polysyllabic rhyme, like freestyle battling, is a spontaneous invention of hip-hop artists that also has antecedents in the English literary tradition. Chaucer often uses them in the form of rich rhyme combinations like “cleped us/precious” and “wyvys/alyve is,” and also occasionally in more complex arrangements, such as in *The Knight’s Tale*: “Swownynge, and baar hire fro the corps away. / What helpeth it to tarien forth the day,” and in *The Franklin’s Tale*: “And with my deth I may be quyt, ywis. / Hath ther nat many a noble wyf er this.” Internal rhyme and chiasmus (inverted rhyme patterns) can also be found in *The Canterbury Tales*, such as in *The Miller’s Tale*: “For curteisie, he sayde, he wolde noon. / The moone, whan it was nyght, ful brighte shoon.” These and other examples show a certain

linguistic playfulness on Chaucer's part, but he never experimented further than the odd line. The first poet to use polysyllabic rhyme consistently as a device was Samuel Butler in the seventeenth century, in his anti-Puritan satire *Hudibras*, which contains the lines: "Beside, he was a shrewd philosopher / And had read every text and gloss-over," and "Profound in all the nominal / And real ways beyond them all." The tone of the poem is sardonic and humorous, and Butler intersperses these complex rhymes with simpler constructions like "gabble/Babel" and imperfect rhymes like "disparage/porridge" to achieve a deliberately absurd effect befitting the story's mock hero. This technique came to be known as "Hudibrastic rhyme" after Butler's creation, and was also used to great effect in the nineteenth century by Lord Byron in his more playful mock epic *Don Juan*. Byron plays his unusual rhymes for comedy, using them to make clever connections that are surprising because they seem obvious: "What men call gallantry, and gods adultery, / Is much more common where the climate's sultry." The best and most often cited example of *Don Juan's* polysyllabic rhyme is the couplet: "But – Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual, / Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck'd you all?" Byron explains his verse structure in the poem as a matter of temperament rather than any kind of statement: "Prose poets like blank-verse, I'm fond of rhyme," but he still can't resist taking an oblique shot at prose poets when he adds: "Good workmen never quarrel with their tools." Other poets of the nineteenth century also experimented with internal rhyme and polysyllabic rhyme, most notably Gerard Manley Hopkins, who appropriately described his poetry as "oratorical – less to be read than heard." However, these constructions never took hold as common practice, probably because most poets did not think of their poetry in Hopkins's terms.

Polysyllabic rhyme became common practice in hip-hop because of the conditions the culture imposes on rappers. Rhyme inherently limits a poet's options in terms of word choice, creating tension in the flow of ideas or narrative, and polysyllabic rhyme amplifies this tension exponentially when the patterns involved become more complex. The mental and lexical dexterity required to navigate this tension acts as a source of distinction among rappers, a game that is used to measure differences in skill level with greater objectivity. Polysyllabic rhyme also creates greater variation in stress and emphasis, especially when used internally, and the nuance and texture produced by overlapping rhymes prevent lines from ending in repetitive pauses, which is a quality of doggerel. In the best rap flows there is hardly

any sense of where lines end or begin, only a constant lyrical stream with rhyme patterns interspersed. However, pauses at the end of lines can still be used for emphasis, and especially for the comedy effect of punch lines. One reason polysyllabic rhyme only finds limited expression in literary poetry is that it couldn't be fully separated from the humorous context of its original use in Butler's *Hudibras*, which also exploits the punch line effect. The twist of meaning that results from juxtaposing unusual combinations of words in each rhyme often simply surprises us into laughter. However, Rakim and the rest of hip-hop's polysyllabic pioneers didn't carry this traditional baggage of association; they were simply using rhyme patterns to produce a more textured soundscape in their lyrics, and also to flaunt a greater command of language, adapting to hip-hop's hyper-competitive environment. As a result, rappers could establish mood using tone and context without trivializing their subject, and employ polysyllabic rhymes as a device for expressing everything from euphoria to anguish and rage to political insight.

The only example I have found of consistent polysyllabic rhyme in a serious literary context occurs in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Tolkien intersperses his prose in the text with frequent songs and poems chronicling the histories and legends of the Elves, Dwarves, Ents, Hobbits, and Men, most of which follow traditional metre and rhyme schemes. The only exception is one of Bilbo's final poems, "The Song of Eärendil," composed during his retirement in Rivendell, which contains the most exquisite polysyllabic rhyming patterns in the English language prior to the appearance of hip-hop. The entire poem is set to a rolling rhythm evocative of the Old English oral storytelling tradition, but Tolkien also follows a strict plan that requires every other line to rhyme internally with the end rhyme pattern from the last. One exemplary passage reads:

Through Evernight he back was borne
 On black and roaring waves that ran
 O'er leagues unlit and foundered shores
 That drowned before the Days began,
 Until he heard on strands of pearl
 Where ends the world the music long,
 Where ever-foaming billows roll
 The yellow gold and jewels wan.

Although the language is solemn and literary, rhymes like "waves that ran / Days began" and "foundered shores / drowned before" would be perfectly

at home in the lyrics of any serious hip-hop song. The pattern has been noted and discussed occasionally in fanzine newsletters and online forums, but scholars of verse form have failed to acknowledge it as a significant innovation on Tolkien's part, which is indicative of his general exclusion from the canon of English literature. Tolkien was a great medievalist and Chaucerian, and a great writer, who strictly disavowed any of the allegorical undertones to his fiction, which has typically caused academics to ignore him, although this may have been precisely his intent. Nevertheless, while I was working on the rap/Chaucer thesis, a friend of mine was crusading actively for the inclusion of Tolkien in the English literature syllabus, while one of my professors taught Quentin Tarantino film scripts in our twentieth-century drama class. This is how the academic canon maintains its integrity, and also how it evolves: nothing is accepted into English coursework until someone persuasively argues for its worth.

But nathelees, this meditacioun
 I putte it ay under correccioun
 Of clerkes, for I am nat textueel;
 I take but the sentence, trusteth weel.

The idea for *The Rap Canterbury Tales* came from a class project, in which a group of us was assigned to adapt one of Chaucer's tales into a dramatic presentation. The tale we chose was *The Knight's Tale* and I was given the task of reworking it into a script. This was in October of 1999, when I was still in the research phase of my thesis, and it occurred to me that adapting Chaucer's poetry to rap would be a great way to creatively reveal the affinity between them. I wrote a rough version over the course of a single weekend, resulting in a twenty-minute performance in front of the class with live music and students in costume playing the parts of the various characters; I played Palamon. At the time I was listening to a number of storytelling rappers, including Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Common, Nas, Big Punisher, Pharoahe Monch, and The Roots. Slick Rick and Outkast had recently dropped a track called "The Art of Storytelling," which pretty much summed up my entire interest in the study of literature. I was especially impressed by the rich polysyllabic rhymes in their various narrative techniques, since narrative poetry presents a much greater challenge to rhyme in that it must stick to a script. It is easier to be lyrically complex if you change topic every other line. Mos Def tells a story of race

discrimination on an airplane when a flight attendant was suspicious of him being in a first-class seat: “Showed her my boarding pass / And then she sorta gasped / All embarrassed, puttin’ extra lime in my water glass / An hour later here she come by walkin’ past: / ‘I hate to be a pest but my son would love your autograph.” The rhymes carry the story rather than impede its clarity, even though they are assembled from combinations of up to three words (“sorta” being two). However, Big Punisher still takes the tongue-twisting prize for the way he sets the scene in a story about a mafia double-cross: “Then in the middle of Little Italy little did we / Know that we riddled to middlemen who didn’t do diddly.” Of course, if every line were this intricate then the content would suffer, but it works perfectly in grabbing the listener’s attention for the tale that follows.

I set myself the task of adapting Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* into the most intricate polysyllabic rhymes I could devise, while still speaking as plainly and remaining as true to the original story as possible. Most of Chaucer’s detailed descriptions had to be abridged, as well as the long speeches and many other elements, but the thrust of the story, names of characters, and historical context remain the same. I used Chaucer’s own adaptation process as my model. Chaucer borrows his *Canterbury Tales* from a wide range of sources, some popular and some highly literary. This is a great balancing act, in which he fills raunchy tavern stories like *The Miller’s Tale* with sophisticated rhetoric and classical allusion, while adapting great poets like Petrarch and Ovid to common Middle English, a popular vernacular language that was thought to be better suited to minstrel romances than to real poetry. The goal of this harmonizing process seems to have been universality, since Chaucer makes every line plain and accessible on its surface, while also infusing his poetry with multiple layers of irony and social criticism. The result is a text that can be read for enjoyment, or to learn something about human nature, or as a historical document, or for its near-infinite depth of ironic complexity, depending on how closely you want to look. Since Chaucer was partially writing to popularize elitist literature, I found his current status as an inhabitant of dusty libraries a little ironic in itself, and felt no qualms about adapting him into the popular vernacular language of hip-hop, which is generally thought to be better suited to radio singles than to real poetry. Performing my hip-hop version of *The Knight’s Tale* as a live oral storytelling experience seemed to restore the poem to its original purpose, since Middle English simply can’t speak to an audience today as it did in Chaucer’s time.

For whoso wol of every word take hede,
 Or reulen hym by every wightes wit,
 Ne shall he nevere thryven, out of drede;

Around that time someone gave me a pamphlet advertising the Canterbury Festival 2000, and I decided I had to attend. My rationale was that I needed to go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury myself to complete the story, but my pilgrimage would be in search of an audience rather than a monument. I contacted the festival organizers and pitched my show, receiving some lukewarm encouragement. In April of 2000 I completed my thesis and graduated, and went on to spend the entire summer revising the rough draft of *The Knight's Tale* that I had churned out in four days for the class presentation back in October. A lot of this revision took place in the same setting as my original inspiration of the summer before, planting trees on clear-cuts in the interior of British Columbia. I taught myself to rap to the rhythm of those repetitive motions—stab the shovel, open the hole, plant the tree, close the dirt, take three steps, stab the shovel. I would freestyle all day to that beat, and also compose lines in my head and write them down when I got home each night. The final version of *The Knight's Tale* printed here was completed in August of that summer. I remember putting the last words in place and then counting the number of lines I had ended up with: 410. Then I went back to Chaucer's version as printed in the *Riverside Chaucer*; his *Knight's Tale* is composed of 2249 lines, a free adaptation of Boccaccio's Italian poem *Il Teseida*, which has 9904 lines. This was not planned, nor is it perfect, but apparently there are algorithms at work in the adaptation process as well, since the story was reduced in length by approximately 80 percent each time. It is difficult to imagine a version of only 80 lines, but I am not one to underestimate the vernaculars of the future.

My pilgrimage to find an audience in Canterbury had mixed results, and I ended up going to graduate school the following year to explore these ideas further. Between 2001 and 2004 I went on to adapt *The Miller's Tale*, *The Pardoner's Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, in the order in which they are printed here. Some might say there is an element of hypocrisy in the fact that they are printed at all, given my purported feelings about poetry on the page. However, this publication follows hundreds of performances in front of live audiences around the world, in which the words were first refined and given life. Like a manuscript, the verses in this book are intended as a

representation of a live oral event, and as a blueprint for recitation out loud, allowing the rhymes to achieve their sound effect. Although I have been described as “an enemy of free verse,” I actually count free verse poems among my all-time favourites, and draw some of my greatest inspiration from poetry on the page. However, using Chaucer and Shakespeare as my models, I believe that poetry must be entertaining first, or have some quality that appeals to a live audience, before any of its other qualities become relevant; where there is no solace, there will be no sentence. The best poetry strikes a balance between the two, but they are not equal in importance or function. This awareness is something that rappers live and breathe, knowing that they dismiss their audience’s needs at their own peril. Talib Kweli proves himself an inheritor of Chaucer’s aesthetic when he raps, “I speak in schools a lot ’cause they say I’m intelligent. / No, it’s ’cause I’m dope; if I was wack I’d be irrelevant.” Spoken Word poets are also masters of cadence and live performance, and watching them always challenges my devotion to rhyme, since they manage to hold audiences spellbound using it only sparingly, or not at all. Free verse poetry has an important role to play in literature, but its dominance has come at the cost of my generation’s interest in participating, threatening poetry’s relevance as an art form. Ultimately I can’t blame anyone’s indifference towards poetry on the influence of television or the sensationalist media; I can only blame it on poets.

When I first set out to find analogies for hip-hop in English literature my goal was to find a poet with enough stylistic similarity to rap that a fruitful comparison could be made. The parallels I found in Chaucer were so extraordinary that even though many of them were revealed to me years ago I am still amazed by them. Chaucer laid out a blueprint in *The Canterbury Tales* for an evolving ideal of poetry’s role in society, based on live competitive events controlled by audience feedback, with rhymed narrative verse as its highest expression, empowering the voices of people from all levels of society, a populist poetic meritocracy. Hip-hop could hardly be a more perfect fulfillment of Chaucer’s vision. The imbalance in favour of text-based poetry introduced by the printing press and resolved by the phonograph (call it the “Guttenberg-Edison Gap”) is one of the reasons it took six hundred years for this vision to come about. The competition that Chaucer designed for his pilgrims has naturally evolved in hip-hop in the form of freestyle battling, which exists as a training ground for artists rather than as an end in itself. Without this interactive mechanism the diversity of perspective and level of talent found in hip-hop music today wouldn’t be nearly as pronounced, and the culture as a whole wouldn’t be nearly as

influential. By promoting this merit-based competitive realm as fundamental to the identity of the culture, hip-hop has managed to spread around the world without falling victim to excessive corruption or distortion of its principles. I'm sure this statement will be disputed, but only by those whose primary understanding of hip-hop comes from MTV. Underground hip-hop is defined by constant innovation and lyrical virtuosity, and by maintaining a direct connection to live audiences, who know they are expected to set the bar high for rappers. The result is an entire generation of aspiring MCs worldwide, who are all using the raw materials of their own language and culture to adapt hip-hop into new forms, challenging themselves to put words together in striking ways, and stimulating a revitalization of the oral tradition: a rhyme renaissance.

THE RHYME RENAISSANCE

This time we live in is a Rhyme Renaissance,
And this history lesson is five minutes long;
If hip-hop is bringin' it, fine, let's get it on,
And consider it official when I finish this song.

My goal is to redefine the whole history of rhyme,
'Cause the only way to free the soul is to free the mind,
And no wisdom as old as this should be confined
To total mystery, so we'll just read the signs
And Da Vinci codes, and try to see the science
In this linguistically composed pristine design.
It goes deep—suppose we could just rewind
To when we first rose to our feet and left the trees behind;
We'd see tribes of bipedal australopithecines
Trying to survive, as species divide and interbreed,
Attending to basic needs, like safe places to sleep,
Raising seeds and making sure they had things to eat,
So they started solving problems by evolving language genes.
It probably started from the need to follow wildebeest herds,
Or the need to distinguish between weeds and herbs,
Or from mimicking the mimicking screams of red and green birds.
It's a chicken/egg riddle: Which came first,
Plain speech or verse? 'Cause as long as there's been words,
There's been awareness of relationships between words,
And when rhymes connect them, new meanings emerge.
The history of languages has been researched

By linguists and traced back to a singular birth,
So the ability to speak rhythmically and sing works
To intrinsically link every human being on this earth.

But I wonder what percent of what happens is meant to happen,
'Cause in the genesis of rap, what has to be factored in
Is that this chapter was invented by black men,
And all human beings are descended from Africans
Who spread across the map in every different direction,
And adapted to every place under the sun,
So their faces started changing as the race was run,
Just as every language came from the same mother tongue,
Since each one directly relates to another one.
From the open plainsmen to the rainforest dwellers,
Every people needed designated storytellers
To pass on their culture orally from the elders,
And rhythm and repetition and rhymes and refrains
Allow performers to organize storylines in their brains,
And memorize more kinds of important signs and names,
And make changes based on the needs of each performance.
Feats of endurance are needed to describe deeds of enormous
Historical importance, like the Trojan-Greek war,
And the horse used to breach the fortress; in the aforementioned
Tradition of reciting, writing was a natural invention
For kings to catalogue things, with practical intentions,

And the offspring, of course, was the birth of the author,
From Homer to Virgil to the immortal words of Chaucer,
The father of modern verse and first formal border-crosser.

But the birth of the author was also the birth of the ego;
Celebrity seems to bring the worst out of people,
Especially with the invention of the printing press,
Which instantly made poetry so much less intimate,
'Cause suddenly poems were mostly written to be read
Alone, instead of written to be said aloud to crowds of listening heads,
And in just a few centuries, rhyme and rhythm were dead,
And forty thousand years of lyricism were watered down,
And exposed to careless prose, on mostly Modernist grounds,
And poets found that the old supportive crowds were not around,
But they hardly even noticed, 'cause they were published
and important now.

But then recorded sound started with Thomas Edison,
One of the most intelligent inventions there's ever been,
And ever since, a person's words can be heard across the globe,
And the emergence of the Rhyme Renaissance was possible.
But it really started off in the Bronx in the seventies,
When kids with limited means produced monster melodies.
High Fidelity beats made their speech more compelling,
When ghetto teens resurrected rhymes and storytelling,
And used ancient wisdom as a system for rebelling.

The rhythm was thrilling, swelling the competition,
And millions of brilliant minds fought for the top positions,
And people finally seem to be starting to sit up and listen,
I'm just tryin' to give 'em a bit of a nudge with this composition.

And the epilogue? It's been about twenty-nine years
Since hip-hop first appeared and confirmed the worst fears
Of the powers that be, 'cause now it's in every urban sphere,
Assaulting virgin ears; it's like a massive attack,
'Cause every language on this planet can be adapted to rap.
It's like a gigantic amoeba that's having a snack,
A generation thinking vocally, acting locally,
Speaking openly, and having an impact globally.

'Cause this time we live in is a Rhyme Renaissance,
And this history lesson was five minutes long.
If hip-hop is bringin' it, fine, let's get it on,
And consider it official when I finish this song,
And it's on ...

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

For myne wordes, heere and every part,
I speke hem alle under correccioun
Of yow that felyng han in loves art,
An putte it al in youre discrecioun
To encesse or maken dymnucioun
Of my langage, and that I yow biseche.
But now to purpos of my rather speche.

The Canterbury Tales has been preserved in dozens of manuscripts from the fifteenth century, but there are no surviving pages that were written during Chaucer's lifetime. Since we have no text written in his own hand, every edition of Chaucer's poetry must therefore admit the possibility of editorial corruption, either by the copying scribe, or in printed versions by the editor, who must by necessity make selections from among the many sources available. This edition is no exception, but its primary purpose is to offer an *interpretation* of the *Tales* for the general reader, with Chaucer's words accompanied by both the modern rap translations and the illustrations for the sake of accessibility and enjoyment, abandoning any pretence of perfect fidelity to the elusive original. As an interpretation, this book presents ideas and methods that will be and should be debated, but my intention has always been to follow the spirit of Chaucer's poetry, rather than the letter of any single historical text.

In accordance with this approach, the Middle English verses printed here were taken from an open-source text on the Internet (of which there are at least half a dozen available), and edited by cross-referencing a number of other editions. The most important of these were *The Riverside Chaucer*, which contains the premier scholarly edition of *The Canterbury Tales* currently available, and a facsimile of *The Ellesmere Chaucer*, which is one of the earliest and best surviving manuscripts of the work. Punctuation was edited in accordance with my sense of the metre and general context of the poem; in hip-hop parlance the lines were edited for their flow. The line references in the notes section at the end of this book follow *The Riverside Chaucer's* citation format, and I have also referred to it often for research purposes in writing the general introduction. *The Riverside Chaucer* has been

my constant companion since I first encountered the *Canterbury Tales*, and I recommend it highly to readers interested in exploring Chaucer further.

The interpretive footnotes glossing the Middle English in this book were mostly derived from internal contextual evidence, while a number of dictionaries and glossaries were consulted and cross-referenced for specific definitions. The footnotes use accessibility and congruity of context as their guiding principles, and they are meant to provide only as much information as is needed to understand the story. However, for greater detail about Chaucer's sources and traditional interpretations, a scholarly edition should be consulted. The glossary in this book is limited to words and phrases too dissimilar to their modern equivalent to be easily recognized. Since most Middle English words differ from modern words only in their spelling, every word that is not glossed should be readable with a little effort. Often the easiest way to recognize a cognate word is to sound it out; for instance, *compaignye* is "company," and *narwe* is "narrow." Chaucer's words get increasingly easier to read as they grow more familiar, so don't get discouraged if it seems difficult at first.

The pronunciation of Middle English remains as elusive today as Chaucer's exact intentions for the text. Like every dialect that preceded sound recording technology, Middle English speech can no longer be heard aurally, so medieval scholars have two main sources of evidence for its pronunciation. The first form of evidence comes from dialects currently spoken in relatively isolated rural English communities that are believed to have changed their speech very little in the past six hundred years. The second form of evidence is rhyme, since it is often assumed that Chaucer and other medieval versifiers tended to use perfectly harmonious sounds for their rhyming pairs. Obviously neither of these two forms of evidence can be relied on with any certainty, so the pronunciation of Middle English remains a source of constant debate. For this reason I encourage readers to begin by pronouncing Chaucer's words as you would modern ones, or however they sound most comfortable to you. If your enjoyment and curiosity are sufficient to want to proceed further, *The Riverside Chaucer* also provides a useful pronunciation guide, currently the best educated guess available.

The order of Chaucer's *Tales* in this book is based on the temporal order in which I adapted them to rap versions, which for the most part also parallels their order in the *Ellesmere*. *The Canterbury Tales* survives in ten fragments, which have been pieced together differently by different editors. Internal evidence makes it clear that *The Knight's Tale* was meant to appear

first in *The Canterbury Tales*, followed directly by *The Miller's Tale*, and that *The Parson's Tale* was meant to appear last, but many of the other *Tales* have been rearranged by various editors to suit different interpretations of Chaucer's intended order. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* usually appears before *The Pardoner's Tale*, but I translated *The Wife of Bath's Tale* last and usually perform it last; it is also printed last here because the Wife of Bath is Chaucer's most popular and generally endearing character, and her *Tale* seems to leave the reader/listener with the best aftertaste. I have also abridged the version of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* printed here, shortening some of the longer speeches and descriptions of ancient rituals and scenery. This was necessary because the rap version required me to focus mainly on the forward thrust of the narrative, since live audiences tend to tune out during lingering descriptions of physical detail. My focus on the dramatic rather than the visually descriptive elements left a number of pages of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* with no corresponding rap translation, and it is these pages I have omitted here. Chaucer was always mindful of the *experience* of a story, and this has been my guiding principle in the editing, adapting, and presentation of the *Tales* in this book.