Chaucer’s Prosody and Poetics
Dr. A Mitchell

The following is meant to remind you of the available technical terminology for analyzing Chaucer’s verse, and can serve as a handy checklist when thinking and writing about his poetry (and many other cultural artefacts besides literary ones). Use this sheet along with my “Checklist for Close Reading” to ask questions about the literature you study. None of this is a substitute for a good dictionary of literary terms, which every student should have on the shelf. Here are just some of the common tools of the trade so that you can consider what needs to be added to your toolkit – so as to enhance your critical capabilities and vocabulary. You need to handle relevant terms when analyzing Chaucer’s writing. So begin here.

A. Figurative Language
Medieval poets tended to cultivate formal qualities that moderns have not especially prized in their own writing, including mannered forms of address, consistently elevated language, and fixed forms of verse (such as the ballade). Their verse also tends to be greatly ornamented, richly embroidered with rhetorical figures. The thing to look out for in Chaucer is the subtle ways in which he innovates on forms and norms handed down to him. To see how he works, however, you must be able to identify the conventions.

Language
- concrete and abstract diction
- denotation and connotation
- register: formal and informal, colloquial, dialect, jargon
- syntax (the order of words)

Speaker, Persona, Tone
- speaker, persona
- address: direct address, free indirect
- objective or impersonal versus personal voice

Figurative Language
- imagery (appeal to senses)
- simile (using like or as)
- metaphor (tenor and vehicle, implied or extended)
- metonymy (a thing substituted for another by association)
  - Pen is mightier than the sword; He’s taken to the bottle
- synecdoche (part for whole or vice versa)
  - Take my hand in marriage; Flesh and blood
- oxymoron; puns or syllepsis
- personification or prosopopeia; allegory

B. Sounds and Sense
French and Italian poets whom Chaucer sought to imitate and translate indulged in the accidental harmonies and disharmonies of verbal sounds. They aimed for what was known as a “natural” (spoken) music. Sometimes sound is made to echo sense, but more often sound patterns do not serve a referential or mimetic function. That is, poets simply take pleasure in the melody and rhythm of verse for its own sake, and perhaps also because such accoustic order reflects something of the balance and measure of the created universe. Rhyme is the most familiar sound pattern in poetry, and it basically demands that poetic composition be oriented around the music (not the other way around). As a result the semantic may be said to be subordinated to the phonetic: e.g., syntax is inverted or contorted so as to get the proper rhyme in place (e.g., “The Former Age,” line 1); rhyme words are chosen less for sense than for sound (Chaucer has some fun with this aspect in “Womanly Noblesse”). But of course rhymes may also produce interesting semantic juxtapositions or recapitulations, and occasionally Chaucer uses rhyme very deftly to produce harmony and discordance, parallelism and antithesis. Here are the main types of rhyme:

- end rhyme (most common)
- internal rhyme (within a line)
• masculine (single-syllable, or when final stressed syllable rhymes as in cat/hat) and feminine rhyme (rhymed stressed syllable followed by unstressed syllable as in butter/clutter)
• exact rhyme and rhyme riche (on the same sounds)
• near rhyme (which is not a failed rhyme since it has the salutary effect of avoiding monotony).

You will already know about these additional “sound effects”:

• onomatapoeia
• alliteration
• assonance
• consonance

C. Metrical Form and Versification

Chaucer confesses early in his career that his meter is sometimes irregular: he speaks of how “som vers fayle[s] in a silable” (House of Fame 1098). Yet this is an ambiguous self-deprecating gesture, since Chaucer may not be speaking about his personal failings so much as the “state of the art” during an early period of literary history when English writers could only make modest claims about their successes in translating foreign verse forms into the vernacular. English verse was still very much experimental.

Chaucer is also aware of the problems of writing poetry in a language that is not standardized and of composing in a manuscript culture. Consider the address to his book at the end of Troilus and Criseyde:

And for ther is so greet diversitee
In English and in wryting of our tonge,
So preye I god that noon miswryte thee,
Ne thee mismetre for defaute of tonge.
And red wher-so thou be, or elles songe,
That thou be understonde I god beseche!
But yet to purpos of my rather speche. (5.1792–99)

Dialect variation and, as Chaucer’s poem to “Adam Scriveyn” makes abundantly clear, the fallibility of scribes and readers mean that it is impossible for Chaucer to control the dissemination of his writings. If readers find his works “mismetered,” Chaucer may not be responsible. Self-deprecation is also a fashion in Chaucer’s time. He is striking the pose of poet manqué, employing the “modesty topos” to good effect.

Chaucer’s early dream visions are in four-beat lines or iambic tetrameter, and he later developed the five-beat line or iambic pentameter. There is enough variation to put into question whether the first type is octosyllabic meter and the second type decasyllabic – that is, whether his verse has a fixed number of syllables. English verse is accentual-syllabic, which means that you can think of Chaucer’s verse as designed around stress rather than syllable count. Take for instance the opening lines of The Book of the Duchess: the first and second lines have nine syllables, the third line eight, the fourth line ten, and yet all these lines have four stresses. Similarly, the five-stress patterns may or may not be decasyllabic.

Moreover, Middle English pronunciation is flexible enough to achieve different syllable counts. One can lengthen words if there does not seem to be enough syllables to fill out a line – so experiment a little by reading aloud. Monosyllabic foul, tail, deer, day can be mono- or disyllabic. It is possible to give separate pronunciation to r (rolling right) or to g (king). One can shorten words when there are apparently too many syllables. Elision is possible as in the case where there is becomes there’s (a form of contraction), or when the final –e is elided or slurred before a vowel as in poet off Breteyne. Another form of shortening is called syncope: this is a contraction in the middle of a word, as when maketh is sounded as makth.

A key distinction to bear in mind when treating versification is that between meter and rhythm: “Meter refers to the abstract model for poetic measure, rhythm to the actual sound and inflection of the words, the free give-and-take of accents, inflections, and pauses within a line” (Stephen Adams, Poetic Designs). Readers should be responsive to the play of expectation and satisfaction and surprise in meter. You do this by noting significant patterns and the effects of deviation from patterns. And you do that by scanning lines.
Scansion is a useful exercise. Sometimes a single verse can be scanned in different ways. This does not mean there is no correct scansion, only that there is freedom in the rhythm. Some verse is more or less free (think of how insistent meter can be in “Hickory, dickory, dock”), and you must determine how free.

Figure out the dominant metrical foot:

- iamb (x /)
- trochee (/ x)
- anapest (x x /)
- dactyl (/ x x)
- sponde /

Then count the number of feet per line:

- trimeter
- tetrameter
- pentameter, etc.

Also identify the fixed forms of verse Chaucer employs – whether rhyme royal, terza rima, or couplets.

Once you determine the general pattern you can note variations from the norm. Metrical variation is the result of what is usually called substitution, inversion, or reversal. A foot can be substituted without altering the meter (though the rhythm will change), as when iambic pentameter has a trochee or spondee at the front and still remains generally iambic. The most common substitutions in iambic verse are trochaic and spondaic. There are also “headless” lines and “broken-backed” lines among other possible irregularities.

You can now start to think about the effects of such variation. Keep in mind that variation is not always spectacularly meaningful or mimetic. Syncopated rhythm may just be pleasurable to hear in a poem. Variation may aid expressiveness or enhance interest. It may be affective or mnemonic, or in some other way part-and-parcel of the reading experience. And metrical forms may function as a sign of the poet’s pedigree, affiliations, or tastes. But in any event critics can probably make only modest claims about the significance of meter or rhythm. Remember that in Middle English variation may come about due to pronunciation and morphology – i.e., one can shorten or lengthen syllables through slurring, contraction, and so on, and there are so many light syllables due to the ubiquitous final –e (the schwa) – all of which indicates that some measure of irregularity is a natural consequence of writing in the vernacular.

Other formal characteristics of verse to be identified when relevant:

- masculine or feminine endings
- end-stopped lines
- enjambed or run-on lines

**D. Aesthetics and Style**

After having spent some time taking in the formal properties of Chaucer’s poetry – the fixed forms, the rhetoric, the versification – you can start to ask larger questions about aesthetic disposition and style. There is no single way of thinking about such issues. But you will have noticed, at least, Chaucer’s predilection for balance and symmetry and subtle variation. The dominance of parallel-and-antithesis is notable, and it may be said to form the basic architectonics of medieval verse: rhymes, refrains, recurring stanzas, incremental repetition of ideas, and even allegorical figures are all constituted out of parallel structures.

Because medieval literature is in one way or another entangled in the establishment culture, you should also be aware of the contested nature of the literary field. Many texts – explicitly or implicitly – act as petitions, commissions, self-promotions, and protests. And since much of the material is inherited from the past, most texts are translations. Chaucer’s works evince this general cultural and aesthetic disposition, which we may call conservative, but he also plays havoc with inherited conventions. But again to see how he is operating, we need to be able to identify and understand the received conventions in the first place.