Ling 103 The origins of rhyme in Western Culture

- Rhyme was not used in the literature of the Greeks and Romans (except occasionally in popular Roman verse and comedy)
- The first systematic use of rhyme in Western poetry was in early medieval Latin hymns.

Three important questions about rhyme are:
1. **What properties** must two words share to count as ‘rhyming’?
2. **Where** in the line must the rhyming words be positioned?
3. How are the lines **organized** with respect to rhyme?

I. Rhyme position in the line

End-rhyme.
The most typical type of rhyme requires that the last word of each line rhyme with the last word of one or more other rhymes.

This pattern is used in the earliest French poems, the epic **chansons de gestes** such as the **Song of Roland**, and in troubadour lyric.

**Rhymes at line-medial breaks**
In addition to end rhyme, early medieval Latin rhyming verse, often contained rhymes occurring breaks in the middle of a line.

An obligatory line-medial break is called a **caesura**.
If a line is divided into two parts by a caesura, each part is called a **hemistich** (= ‘half line’).

Quidam prosapia | vir progenitus genera
Motibus ingenitam | decorabit nobilitatem
Qui dominos plures | habuisse datur locupletes

‘While in antiquity | there abode a knight of much glory
Virtuous strengtheners | of the lustrous fame of his fathers
And all his seigneurs were good | and noble examples of knighthood’
II. Organization of lines by rhyme

Laisse (lay)
- In the laisse of early French epic, all consecutive lines have end-line assonance.
- There is no fixed number of lines in the laisse — a laisse can be short or long.
- Because there is only one ‘rhyme’ (assonance) in each laisse, the laisses are called monorhymed.

Fixed number of rhyming lines.

a. Couplets.
- Pairs of rhyming lines: couplets, or in French la rime plate.
- This style of rhyme became predominant in 11th century France, but was at first used only for short lines (lines with 8 or fewer syllables).
- The first poet to write 12 syllable couplets (rhyming alexandrines) in French was Girart de Roussillon in 1315.
- By the 16th century in France it became normal to write in alternating masculine and feminine rhyming couplets. (In a masculine line the final syllable of the line is stressed; in a feminine line the final syllable is unstressed).

b. Quatrains
- Four rhyming lines: quatrains,
- Experimentation with rhyming patterns led to the creation of certain patterns for groups of lines called stanzas (or sometimes, following Greek poetic terminology, strophes).

c. Troubadour stanzas
- The troubadours (or trouvères) were medieval lyric poets who wrote principally in Old Occitan, the Romance language of the south of France.
- The earliest recorded troubadour lyrics were written by Guillem IX, duke of Aquitaine (1071-1127).

In these lyrics there is a fixed rhyme pattern in each stanza.
In the following song, Guillem uses the pattern

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8  8  8  4  8  4
a  a  a  b  a  b
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a: *en, atz, itz, ur, es, ort, uy*

b: *au*

• Each column refers to the properties of a line.
• The first line has 8 syllables, the second 8 syllables, the third 8 syllables, the fourth 4 syllables and so on.
• The letter under each number indicates the rhyme. All lines having the same letter must have end-rhyme.
• Lines 1, 2, 3, and 5 all rhyme (the ‘a-rhyme’), and lines 4 and 6 also rhyme, but with a different rhyme (the ‘b-rhyme’).
• The rhymes can vary from stanza to stanza, but the pattern of rhymes remains identical.
• In this song, the a-rhyme is different in each stanza (*en, ats, itz, ur, es, ort, uy*).
• The b-rhyme remains fixed (*au*) throughout the whole song.
Farai un vers de dreyt nien:
I'm writing a song about nothing at all:
Non er de mi ni d'autra gen,
Not about me or about anyone else,
Non er d'amor ni do joven,
Not about love or youth,
Ni de ren au,
Or about anything,
Qu'enans fo trobatz en durmen
I've just composed it while sleeping
Sobre chevau.
Upon a horse.

No sai en qual horaːm fuy natz:
I don't know under what star I was born:
No suy alegres ni iratz,
I'm neither happy nor sad,
No suy estrayns ni sui privatz,
I'm neither foreign nor am I familiar,
Ni noːn puesc au,
I can't do anything about it,
Qu'enaiissi fuy de nueitz fadatz,
Since I was given this skill by a fairy
Sobr' un pueg au.
One night upon a high mountain.

No sai quoraːm suy endurmitz
I don't know if I'm asleep or awake,
Ni quoraːm velh, so'm no m' o ditz.
At least when nobody tells me.
Per pauc no m' es lo cor partitz
My heart is nearly broken
D'un do coraitz:
By a deadly sorrow:
E no m' o pretz una soritz,
But I can't do anything but crack a smile,
Per sanh Marsau!
By Saint Martial!

Malautz suy e tremi murir,
I'm sick and I'm shaking like death,
E ren noːn mai mas quan n'aug dir;
And I don't know anything about it except
Metge querrai al mieu albir,
what they tell me; I'm looking for a doctor
E no m' es cau;
in my fantasies, but I don't know who;
Bos metges er siːm pot guerir,
He'll be good if he can cure me,
Mas non, si amaau.
but bad if I get worse.

Amigu'ai ieu, no sai qui s'es,
I had a girl friend, but I don't know who,
Qu'anc non la vi, si m'ajut fes;
Because, believe me, I never saw her;
Niːm fes queːm plassa ni queːm pes,
She never pleased me, never upset me,
Ni no m' en cau,
And I don't care,
Qu'anc non ac Norman ai Frances,
Because no one Norman nor French
Dins mon ostau.
Has ever been in my house.

Anc non la vi et am la fort,
I never saw her but I love her well,
Anc no a ic dreyaːt ni noːm fes tort;
She never did me right or wrong;
Quan non la vey, be m' en deport,
When I don't see her, I easily do without her
Noːm pretz un jau,
I value her less than a chicken's worth,
Qu'ieːn sai gensor at bellazor,
I know someone, in fact, more lovely and
E que mais vau.
beautiful, and who is worth more.

Fag ai lo vers, no say de cuy;
My song is done, I don't know who about,
E trametrai lo a selhuy
I'm going to send it to someone
Que loːm trametra per autruy
Who will through another send it
Lay vers Anjau,
Down to Anjou,
Queːm tramezes del sieu estuy
And I'm going to ask him to send me back
La contraclau.
The key to her box.
III. Types of Rhyme

The types of rhymes can be understood in terms of the syllable constituents which must match.

1. Assonance:
   - The nucleus of the final stressed syllable must match.
   - The onset and coda can be different, as can material in syllables following the stressed syllable.
   - This style was predominant in French until the 11th century, and did not die out until the 15th century.

La Vie de Saint Alexis (11th cent. French)

Bons fut li siecles al tems ancienoúr, quer feiz i eret e justise ed amoúrs, s’i ert credance, dont or n’i at nul prôút; toz est nüdez, perdude at sa colóúr. ja mais n’iert tels com fut as ancieisoúrs.

Life was good in ancient times, because there was faith and justice and love, and there was belief, which now there is hardly any of; everything is tired and has lost its color: it will never be like it was in ancient times.

Al tems Noé ed al tems Abraáám ed al David, cui Deus paramat tant, bons fut li siecles, ja mais n’iert si vaillánz; viels est e frailes, toz s’en vait declinánt, si’st empeiriez, toz biens vait remanánt.

In the time of Noah and the time of Abraham and of David, whom God loved so much, life was good, no one was so noble; now everything is old and weak, and is going downhill, and is deteriorated, all good things remain behind.

Laisse 1: assonance on -ou- [ɔu]
Laisse 2: assonance on -an, -am = nasalized [ɑ]
Song of Roland: Laisse XIII

«Seignors barons,» dist li emperedre Chârles,
«Li reis Marsilie m'at tramis ses messâges;
De son aveir me voelt doner grant màsse,
Ors e leons e veltres chadenâbles,
Set cenz cameilz e mil hostors mudâbles,
Quatre cenz mulz chargez del ór d'Arábie,
Avoec iço plus de cinquante chârre;
Mais il me mandet que en France m'en álge:
Il me sivrat ad Ais, a mon estáge,
Si recevat la nostre lei plus sálve;
Chrestiëns ert, de mei tendrat ses màrches;
Mais jo ne sai quels en est sis corâges.»
Dïent Franceis: «Il nos i covient guárde!»
2. **Perfect rhyme**
All material in the word from the **nucleus of the stressed syllable** to the end of the word must match.

\[ \text{locomotion} \sim \text{commotion} \sim \text{potion} \sim \text{lotion} \neq \text{ration} \neq \text{votion} \neq \text{solution} \]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\sigma \\
\text{Onset} \\
\text{Rhyme} \\
\text{Nucleus} \\
\text{Coda} \\
\vdots
\end{array}
\]

3. **Rich rhyme** (French *rime riche, rime léonine*)
All material in the word from the **onset** of the stressed syllable.
In other words, the entire stressed syllable (and anything that follows) must rhyme.

\[ \text{motional} \sim \text{locomotion} \sim \text{demotion} \neq \text{potion} \neq \text{lotion} \neq \text{ration} \neq \text{votion} \neq \text{solution} \]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\sigma \\
\text{Onset} \\
\text{Rhyme} \\
\text{Nucleus} \\
\text{Coda} \\
\vdots
\end{array}
\]

4. **Final syllable rhyme.**
Here the rhyme constituent of the last syllable — regardless of whether it is a stressed syllable or not — must match.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\sigma \\
\text{Onset} \\
\text{Rhyme} \\
\text{Nucleus} \\
\text{Coda}
\end{array}
\]

\[ \text{motional} \sim \text{ration} \sim \text{solution} \]
**Final syllable** rhyme is occasionally seen in medieval Latin poetry.

plúribus ~ discumbéntibus ~ pejóribus ~ melióribus
inímico ~ populo
túum ~ monastérium

Aeternus orbis conditor (St. Ambrose)

Aeternus orbis cónditor, -or
Christus, perente non mínor, -or
Originali témpore, -re
Dignatus orbem cóndere, -re

Hora sub hac novíssima, -ima
Mundi petivit ínfima, -ima
Promissus ante plúrimis -is
Propheticis oráculis. -is

Ut providus Ezéchiel, -el
Corona plebis Ísrahel, -el
Clausam notavit jánuam, -am
Summo tonanti pérviam. -am

Ergo manente víscerum -um
Pudore virginálium, -um
Divina proles térreae -ae
Se miscuit substántiae. -ae

**Origins of French and English ‘perfect rhyme’**
Perfect rhyme became conventional for French poetry in the 12th cent. and probably emerged as a kind of combination of assonance and final syllable rhyme.
‘Intermediate Rhyme’
A ‘middle ground’ between perfect rhyme on the one hand and assonance and final syllable rhyme on the other can occur when the conditions for both assonance and final syllable rhyme are met.

This means that the stressed syllable nucleus and the last syllable rhyme must match — but the consonants intervening can be different:

novíssima ~ ínfima
sócios ~ bónos ómnes ~ honóres

This type of rhyme occurs rather frequently in contemporary rap/hip-hop lyrics, e.g. Busta Rhymes (When Disaster Strikes):

númeral ~ úsual       smóthered ~ cóvered       ráisin' me ~ amázes me
chěck for ~ néxt door  móvin’ ~ dóin’             āsk you ~ pás through
Béntley ~ sént me      mād cool ~ mān’s jewels  stárt shit ~ márkét
bite it off ~ light is off  impréssive ~ expénsive
ingrédie(n)t ~ sée me wit(h)
Rhyme to localize a text in time

| 1110 | [ai] = [ei] before nasals | Voyage de St. Brendan |
| 1163-69 | [ai] = [ei] before nasals | Édouard le Confesseur |
| 1170 | [ai] = [ei] before nasals | St. Gilles |
| 1184 | [ai] = [ei] before a consonant | Thomas Becket |
| 1190 | [ai] = [ei] everywhere | Simon de Fresne |

**St. Laurent:** [ai] = [ei] only before nasals, hence probably prior to 1180s

Chascuns de[t] eschever la peine  peine 'pain' / soveraine 'sovereign'
Et traire a la gloire soveraine  cf. Mod. French [pɛ̃] [suvrɛ̃]

compare  **Le Secré de Secrez** (Anglo-Norman, late 13th cent.)

| fere / cre[i]re | ‘to do / to believe’ |
| hurter / ave[i]r | ‘to strike against / to have’ |

Rhyme to localize a text in place

| Lat. ũ > OFr. u > ū | mûrum > mur  Mod. Fr. [mûʁ] |
| Lat. ō > OFr. o > ō | flôrem > flor > fleur [flœʁ] |
| but  OFr. u, o > Norman u |

**Brendan** 1699-1700

E puis desus esteit li murs  ‘And then above were the walls’
De parais qui clot les flurs.  ‘Of paradise, which enclosed the flowers’

**St. Laurent** 411-12

Decius Cesar al tiers jor  ‘Decius Caesar on the third day’
Se sist al sié l’empereor  ‘Sat at the throne of the emperor’

| jor / emperer | ‘day / emperor’ |
| Secré de Secrez 921-22 |
| seignur / creatur | ‘lord / creature’ |

| Fr. seigneur, créature [sɛɲœʁ, kʁeatœʁ] |