Rime

In the verse-craft of many European vernaculars, including English, rhyme shows us a historical development now taken as a natural default. In twenty-first-century England—taken here as curious rather than normative—regular couplet rhyme often serves as the only rule-bound feature of elegiac verse met at funerals, on social media, and in newspaper death notices. Such writing often displays loose or free meter, and no other structure. These twenty-first-century death couplets, as I term them, might now be the main way that those living in England interact with verse-craft consciously (as opposed to everyday, unthought contact with the lyrics in popular music). Such couplets might or might not form good poetry, but readers care about them, and so they matter for folk poetics, for scholarship's grasp on the understanding of verse among non-experts. Indeed, some evidence suggests that most respondents reach first for rhyme when asked to define poetry (Blohm and Knoop, 2022).

This folk association between rhyme and poetry might itself drive art poets away from rhyme. When professional poets use couplets, they do so knowingly, and sometimes make a point of it. Maggie Millner's recent long poem *Couplets* uses regular rhyme, but signals the felt oddity of this formal choice through its title. The book lays out each couplet as its own stanza. On the cover of the UK edition, the main title repeats, facing itself, with the descenders of the **p** of *couplets* twining into a knot: the design itself invests in the verse's distinctiveness (Millner 2023). In present-day art poetry, regular rhyme often becomes a marked choice. This attitude to rhyme might have several roots, but one root is probably a desired distance from folk practices such as death couplets and advertising jingles. Today, that is, rhyme might be too popular to be popular with art poets.

Yet regular rhyme has a history and a start. Rhyme arrived, and it arrived during the long spell we awkwardly call the Middle Ages. Other traditions have sustained rhyme for

rather longer than English: regular rhyme is at least a millennium older in Classical Chinese poetry. Equally, verse-craft does not need regular rhyme. Many European vernacular traditions once lacked regular rhyme, as did classical Latin and Greek verse. Looking further afield, many lineages of verse-craft live happily without it: conventional Somali poetry, for instance, relies on regular alliteration as its standard ornament. Poets working without regular rhyme know the possibility exists, and reject it. In orthodox Old English alliterative verse, for example, Cynewulf shows that he can rhyme regularly if he wants to (Cynewulf 2013, *Christ II*, ll. 591–596 and *Elene*, ll. 1236–1250). We also have what modern scholarship has called the *Rhyming Poem* (Macrae-Gibson, ed., 1983). To my knowledge, the first sustained regular rhyme in English emerges in the later twelfth century (*Poema Morale*, Marcus, ed., 1934; *Pater Noster* in Morris, ed., 1868), a fact suiting the idea that English regular rhyme emerged by imitating French verse-craft. But the evidence hints at a drift towards regular rhyme in English earlier than that. The near-regular *Rhyme of King William* (most recent ed. in Weiskott 2016, p. 178) emerges probably before, and possibly in the same circles as, the earliest known poem in any kind of French that uses true rhyming couplets, rather than assonating couplets, Benedeit's Anglo-Norman *Voyage of Brendan*. In both French and English, the codification of regular rhyme—though not its invention—might be a Norman story.

Appropriately, the noun *rhyme* itself sustained a wider range of meanings in Middle English than it does today. It entered the language in the twelfth century as a word meaning meter or measure. Its first known user, Orm, deploys it in this sense (Orm 2023, ll. P44, P101). Only later did *rhyme* develop its primary modern sense, sound-matching, or what the *Middle English Dictionary* calls, from a present-day perspective, "rime proper" (*MED rime* n. (3), sense 1(b); *OED rhyme*, sense 1.a). Fittingly, Orm's poetry stays carefully metered, but has neither regular rhyme nor regular alliteration. It therefore forms English's earliest fully

blank verse, four centuries before Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. Later, seemingly a little before 1300, writers and speakers began to use *rhyme* in English as a metonymy for formed verse in general. This sense has survived to the present. The technical sound-matching sense of the noun seems to crystalize at roughly the same time. Perhaps some blurring of the metonymic use and the technical use contributed to the modern folk-poetic reliance on rhyme to define poetry.

French gave English the word *rhyme*, so it offers one small example of the growth of the early Middle English lexicon. However, lexicography remains uncertain about the word's earlier origins. Old French and Anglo-Norman *rime* might have emerged from Latin *rhythmus*, but the French word also might have grown out of a Germanic ancestor shared with Old English *rim*/*rime*, meaning number or count. In the twelfth century, just-borrowed French *rime* and surviving Old English *rime* must have blended somewhat in practical use: Orm is not only the first writer that lexicography has found using *rime* borrowed from French, but also the last writer found using Old English *rime* (Orm 2023, l. 11248). He likely felt little of the etymological distinction that dictionaries draw today.

Studying rhyme's history in the Middle Ages makes meeting rhyme in poetry from any time stranger and more fun. We think we know rhyme as a default, an assumed phenomenon in English poetry and song. On a closer look, though, both the practice and the word prove richly particular.

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