

RHYTHM AND SYNTAX

IN THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS

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by  
Gregory Hancock Roscow, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Gregory Hancock Roscow, B.A. (University of Victoria)

SUPERVISOR: Dr C. Wood

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## PREFACE

The frontispiece of the famous Corpus Christi manuscript of Troilus and Criseyde<sup>1</sup> shows Chaucer reading his poem aloud to a courtly gathering. This illumination could well stand at the head of the collected researches of scholars who have, since about the turn of the century, concerned themselves with the practice of oral delivery in the Middle Ages. It is now fairly generally admitted that Chaucer, with other medieval poets, designed his verse for oral declamation, but what we do not know -- and perhaps can never know with absolute certainty -- is how he read it, or expected others to read it. Can we hear the living voice of Chaucer from the printed page? Most scholars who ask themselves this question as a basis for research seem content to offer tabulations of the obvious features of oral delivery: addresses to the audience, filler phrases, tags, and the like.<sup>2</sup> But how the verse was actually recited is a subject that has received surprisingly little attention, apart from discussions of Chaucer's metre and more general theories of medieval versification. As a later chapter will show, the majority of works in these two areas of study has not significantly advanced our knowledge of how best to read Chaucer's

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1 Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 61, f. 1.v.

2 See, for example, Bronson, "Chaucer's Art in Relation to his Audience"; Giffin, Studies on Chaucer; Crosby, "Chaucer and the Custom of Oral Delivery".

poetry. It is only quite recently that the mechanics of this poetry have been given close attention as a first step toward interpretation and evaluation. Much remains to be done with respect to Chaucer's prosody and grammar before we can appreciate how a medieval audience would have apprehended his works.

The standard editions of Chaucer, chiefly those of Skeat and Robinson, are in many ways inadequate if one wants to determine how Chaucer might have read his poems. These texts allow us to get the sense of the verse and catch some of the feel of the original but put the poet in more modern dress than need be. In several cases they muffle Chaucer's speaking voice and pander to the expectations and conventions to which we, living in an age of print, have grown accustomed. The manuscripts are often heavily emended to conform with late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of prosody, and modern punctuation is given as a supposed aid. As I hope to show, however, through a study of The Book of the Duchess, the emendations are in large measure unjustified and the modern punctuation simply unnecessary and misleading. We might have to alter our ideas about the rhythm or metre of Chaucer's short line, the so-called octosyllabic couplet, and admit that the original punctuation is more meaningful in this verse than any more recent system could be.

For this study I have used the Chaucer Society's transcriptions of the extant manuscripts of The Book of the

Duchess (MSS. Fairfax 16, Tarner 346, Bodley 638) and Thynne's edition of 1532.<sup>3</sup> All quotations are from MS. Fairfax 16, identified by the abbreviation "B.D.". These transcriptions seem reasonably accurate, though I have not had the opportunity of comparing them with the manuscripts themselves, nor have I found a statement of editorial policy in any book of the series. At the beginning of the three-text edition of The Book of the Duchess certain orthographical peculiarities are briefly noted ("ȝ is for t with a curl over it. ȝ is for ȝ") but there is no mention of the possible variety of marks which the virgule (/) is used to represent. In the absence of any comment one assumes that the virgule was used consistently in MS. Fairfax 16 (except for lines 31-96, which are in a later hand) and is similar to the mark found, for example, in MS. Harley 2253 of King Horn.<sup>4</sup> In any case it is the position rather than the shape of the punctuation mark which is most significant.

Concerning these transcriptions as a whole, no less a discerning scholar than J.G. Southworth has remarked that "The answers [to dialectal differences in fourteenth-century English] can only be found . . . in the MSS or printed texts not edited on a preconceived prosodic principle. The texts

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<sup>3</sup> F.J. Furnivall, ed., A Parallel-Text Edition of Chaucer's Minor Poems, Chaucer Society, No. 21 (MSS. Fairfax 16, Tarner 346, Thynne's edition); Nos. 23, 60 (MS. Bodley 638).

<sup>4</sup> Facsimile of British Museum MS. Harley 2253, The Early English Text Society, No. 235, f. 83ff.

of the Chaucer Society were not so edited."<sup>5</sup> A quick comparison of the MS. Fairfax 16 transcription with the editions of Skeat and Robinson reveals the extent to which a "pre-conceived prosodic principle" changes the appearance, and more important, the reading, of the verse.

Using these transcriptions I have in the following chapters tried to determine the relationship between the rhythm of the verse and syntactic constructions. This seems to me the surest way toward understanding how Chaucer might have read The Book of the Duchess aloud to his audiences. It has been necessary to show that Chaucer's short line is rhythmical rather than metrical, which has meant examining once again the problem of final -e. The discussion of rhythm and metre which follows is the most lengthy part of the thesis, for in showing the verse to be rhythmical I have had to examine not only The Book of the Duchess but also a certain amount of pre-Chaucerian poetry. The relationship between rhythm and syntax is considered in the final chapter, where the question is raised: is there, in The Book of the Duchess, a correspondence between syntactic variety and dramatic purpose? A full answer to this question is obviously beyond the scope of the thesis, but I hope to have done some of the necessary preliminary investigations concerning

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5 Southworth, Verses of Cadence, p. 3.

the grammar and prosody of Chaucer's early poetry and to have shown the importance of these in determining, as far as is possible, the poet's speaking voice.

Apart from the usual marks to indicate stressed and weak syllables (', ~) I have had occasion to use the following symbols:

- + a line of verse having four main stresses and an indeterminate number of weak syllables, and which is characterised by a balance of two phrases (usually set apart by a virgule in the manuscripts)
- 4 a line having four main stresses, but not balanced as described above
- 3,5 lines having three and five main stresses respectively; if followed by + these lines are divisible into two phrases, again separated in most instances by a virgule

All these symbols are placed to the left of the line. The virgule is used as in the Chaucer Society transcriptions. Orthographical peculiarities, as noted above, are not given here since those cases in which a variety of t or n perhaps indicates a final -e do not appreciably affect the rhythm of the verse. Where lines of poetry are quoted as prose, the beginning of a new line is indicated by a capital letter, as in the transcriptions, and not by the conventional stroke (/) since the use of this sign might be confused with the virgules representing manuscript punctuation. For Chaucer's poems other than The Book of the Duchess and for his prose the edition of F.N. Robinson (second edition) has been used.

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I

FINAL -E

Before attempting to scan individual lines of The Book of the Duchess it is necessary to consider once again the problem of final -e in Chaucer's verse. So much has been written on this subject since the early eighteenth century that it would seem nothing new could be said. Though there have been some dissenting voices, it is generally accepted that the final -e in fourteenth-century English verse was meant to be sounded except in special cases: namely, when apocopated at the end of some lines and elided before a vowel or h. Reading Chaucer with this general rule in mind, however, makes one wonder if he would have read his own verse so woodenly. The iambic movement established by the sounding of final -e's easily becomes monotonous, and in cases where such a movement does not correspond with what one assumes was the usual accentuation of words or with the syntax, simply ludicrous. My investigations into this problem stem from a belief that Chaucer's poems demand some sort of dramatic recitation and that in all likelihood he would have so read them to his audiences.

The tradition of sounding the final -e in Chaucer's verse seems to have begun with John Urry's edition of the poet's works in 1721. Urry believed that Chaucer was a

good poet; he also believed that a good poet is one who writes metrically regular verse, and so undertook to make Chaucer conform to eighteenth-century standards by adding extra syllables or introducing short expletives and by insisting that final -e be pronounced. Urry died before his edition was printed, but the work was carried on by Timothy Thomas, who among other things compiled a glossary.

Concerning Urry's principles of editing, Thomas comments:

His chief business was to make the Text more correct and compleat than before. He found it was the opinion of some learned Men that Chaucer's Verses originally consisted of an equal number of Feet; and he himself was perswaded that Chaucer made them exact Metre, and therefore he proposed in this Edition to restore him (to use his own Expression) to his own feet again, which he thought might be performed by a careful Collation of the best printed Editions and good MSS.

He had observed that several Initial and Final Syllables in use in Chaucer's time, and since, had been omitted or added at pleasure in the MSS by unskilful Transcribers, from whence the same Errors crept into the Printed Editions, whereby many Verses were rendered unjust in their Measure; so that the lameness of many of them might easily be remedied by the discreet Addition or Omission of such Syllables.

. . . . the chiefest of [the final syllables] . . . was the Final e, which he always marked with an accent when he judged it necessary to pronounce it . . . And in short I find it acknowledged by him, "That whenever he could by no other way help a Verse to a Foot, which he was perswaded it had when it came from the Maker's hands, but lost by the Ignorance of Transcribers, or Negligence of Printers, he made no scruple to supply it with some Word or Syllable that serv'd for an Expletive" . . .

<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Five Hundred Years, vol. I, pp. 357-8.

This edition has been judged bad by later scholars and editors; Professor Skeat, for example, calls it "a very bad one" and contrasts it to "the excellent one by Tyrwhitt"<sup>2</sup> in 1775-8. Though Urry's admitted lack of scruples in restoring Chaucer to his feet led to fierce emendation which subsequent editors have found excessive, his insistence on the sounding of final -e has been preserved. The section "Grammatical Hints" in Skeat's one-volume edition of Chaucer's complete works includes the following information:

Observe that, in Chaucer's English, the final syllables -e, -ed, -en, -es, almost always form a distinct and separate syllable, so that a large number of words had then a syllable more than they have now. Unless this rule be observed, no progress in the study is possible. In particular, always sound this final -e (like the a in China) at the end of a line.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly in F.N. Robinson's standard modern text of Chaucer the practice of sounding final -e's is encouraged:

. . . many words retained a syllabic -e . . . . In general, final e's that appear in the present text may be assumed to represent correct Chaucerian usage. For it has been the editor's intention to remove all the incorrect scribal e's, which abound in the manuscripts.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of any convincing phonological evidence one might well wonder why in reading we should "always sound this final -e" or assume that sounding it represents "correct Chaucerian usage". The rule for pronouncing -e is

2 Skeat, ed., Complete Works, p. xvii.

3 Ibid., p. xviii.

4 Robinson, ed., The Works, p. xxx.

adhered to so faithfully and dogmatically in editions of Chaucer that one suspects it is being used for a more important reason than that of trying to approximate fourteenth-century pronunciation. This rule is, in fact, the cornerstone of the traditional view of Chaucer's prosody, first elaborated by Thomas Tyrwhitt in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Before examining Tyrwhitt's influential "Essay on the Language and Versification of Chaucer", however, I must answer to the possible objection that in quoting from editions concerning the sounding of -e I have neglected the huge volume of material on this subject, in books and scholarly journals, which might present more informed and documented opinions. It is true that much intensive work has been done in the hope of determining if these -e's were sounded, and if so what that sound was like, and when they ceased to be pronounced in ordinary speech and in verse. But from what I have read, these questions are as unresolved now as they were in the late nineteenth century when so much of this work was being done. This is not though why I have refrained from quoting other material. There are two reasons for my working primarily with the editions at this stage: first, they represent in large measure the established scholarly opinion regarding final -e; second, and more important, they are the means by which most people come to know and read Chaucer, so that the information given in them

about pronunciation and grammar is carried on through generations of readers. Unless one simply does not believe this information, or has access to the manuscripts themselves, or is prepared to do a great deal of research, the rule for sounding the -e's in Chaucer becomes more firmly established. One wonders what the reaction would have been had Chaucer read aloud the following line from Troilus and Criseyde according to the rule: "But ófté gan the hérte gláde and quake" (T.C. II, 1321). People in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may have appreciated such metrical regularity but did those living in the fourteenth century, and do we now, find this "de-dum-de-dum" rhythm expressive?

Tyrwhitt's "Essay on the Language and Versification of Chaucer", printed with his edition of The Canterbury Tales in 1775, was a more conservative attempt than Urry's to restore Chaucer to his feet. Unlike his predecessor Tyrwhitt did not tamper greatly with the manuscripts, but like him believed in a metrical theory which, given that one accepted the basic assumptions, could be convincingly applied to Chaucer's verse. He assumed that this verse was syllabic with, for the most part, a consistent number of equidistant main stresses, and with this "preconceived prosodic principle" in mind tried to account for Chaucer's seeming deviations from it:

The great number of verses, sounding complete even to our ears, which is to be found in all the least cor-

rected copies of his works, authorizes us to conclude, that he was not ignorant of the laws of metre. Upon this conclusion it is impossible not to ground a strong presumption, that he intended to observe the same laws in the many other verses which seem to us irregular; and if this was really his intention, what reason can be assigned sufficient to account for his having failed to grossly and repeatedly . . . ?<sup>5</sup>

Working from this "strong presumption" Tyrwhitt answers his own question further on in the essay and observes that

. . . a great number of Chaucer's verses labour under an apparent Deficiency of a syllable, or two. In some of these perhaps the defect may still be supplied from MSS.; but for the greatest part I am persuaded no such assistance is to be expected; and therefore, supposing the text in these cases to be correct, it is worth considering whether the verse also may not be made correct, by adopting in certain words a pronunciation, different indeed from modern practice, but which, we have reason to believe, was used by the author himself.<sup>6</sup>

Like Urry, Tyrwhitt found that metrical regularity was most easily achieved by sounding the final -e's in the verse:

But nothing will be found of such extensive use for supplying the deficiencies of Chaucer's metre as the pronunciation of the e feminine . . .<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious that Tyrwhitt was working from a set of ideas concerning versification back to Chaucer's verse, as many have done since him, rather than the other way about. The assumption, overtly stated in Tyrwhitt's "Essay" and

5 Spurgeon, Five Hundred Years, vol. I, p. 444.

6 Loc. cit.

7 Loc. cit.

still widely accepted, that Chaucer wrote metrically regular verse, is a handicap to our understanding of how he might have recited his poetry. It is frequently an annoying assumption; Tyrwhitt, for example, acknowledges the praise of Chaucer by his contemporaries -- "chiefe Poete of Britaine", "the flour of Poetes" -- but concludes that the use of these and similar titles "must be supposed to implie their admiration of his metrical skill."<sup>8</sup> Had Tyrwhitt and those who have followed him not begun with such a ready hypothesis and used such tools as variable stress and the sounding of final -e to establish their theory of prosody, they might have found something quite different in Chaucer's verses. It is also sometimes a rather antagonistic assumption; in 1861, F.J. Child, a strong believer in the pronunciation of -e, declared that "unless Chaucer wrote good metre, there is an end to all inquiry into the forms of his language."<sup>9</sup>

The history of final -e since Tyrwhitt has been one of repeated attacks and counter-attacks by those who would sound the vowel and those who would not. Those who believe that -e was pronounced, subject of course to elision, apoco-

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8 Spurgeon, p. 443.

9 F.J. Child, "Observations on the Language of Chaucer", pp. 449, 450n.

pation, and slurring, are generally interested in showing that Chaucer's long line was decasyllabic, replacing the earlier notion that it was a counterpart of the Italian endecasillabo. Those who have tried to prove that -e was not sounded have in many cases been advancing the concept of a rhythmical as opposed to a metrical line; for example, G.F. Nott,<sup>10</sup> and more recently, J.G. Southworth<sup>11</sup> and Ian Robinson.<sup>12</sup> It is not necessary here to document the evidence on either side; the important thing is that, as I have said earlier, the modern texts of Chaucer are still edited according to Tyrwhitt's theory that final -e's were sounded in Chaucer's time. J.G. Southworth outlines the development of the controversy in Chapter Two of Verses of Cadence and advances his opinion that the sounding of -e is not historically justified.

Most of what has been written about final -e is based on Chaucer's long line, supposedly iambic pentameter or decasyllabic, whereas my interest is in the short line of his earliest long poem. Obviously, what is said about the -e's in the long line will apply to those in the short. It is interesting, however, to speculate that perhaps the marked interest in the lines of The Canterbury Tales, for example,

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10 G.F. Nott, "Dissertation" (1815).

11 Southworth, Verses of Cadence (1954).

12 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody (1971).

rather than those of The Book of the Duchess or The House of Fame reveals a greater desire to prove that Chaucer wrote iambic pentameters than to show that -e was in fact sounded in fourteenth-century verse. The pronunciation of -e is, in Chaucer's poetry, the cornerstone of the iambic theory. If the -e were not sounded, at least not under the conditions given in the accepted rule, then perhaps Chaucer did not write regular iambics; perhaps his verse is not metrical, as generations of scholars would have us believe.

The short lines of The Book of the Duchess and The House of Fame are most often described as octosyllabic couplets, but since the rule for final -e applies to these poems (with the necessary editorial emendation) as well as those in the longer lines,<sup>they</sup> are tacitly accepted as iambic tetrameters, though this is a term which is seldom if ever used. If, however, in the two short-line dream visions the -e's are generally silent, except in special instances, we then have verse which is neither iambic nor octosyllabic. What sort of verse is it? My answer to this question will come in the following chapter, after I have shown why the traditional rule for final -e seems inapplicable to the verse of The Book of the Duchess.

The origin and development of final -e is fairly straightforward:

What we know is that throughout the Anglo-Saxon period many words ended in -e, that the descendants of these words in Middle English were usually spelled to end in

-e, and that by the early Tudor period all these -e's were mute.<sup>13</sup>

There can even be some certainty about the quality of this vowel in its development: "we may reasonably presume, that our ancestors first passed from the broader sound of a to the thinner sound of e feminine, and not at once from a to e mute."<sup>14</sup> The real problem comes when we ask when and why the final -e ceased to be pronounced. Those who argue that the -e should be sounded in Chaucer's verse have often been caught in a circular argument, as Ian Robinson has shown:

The metre is regular because final -e's are sounded in accordance with historical grammar; final -e's are sounded in accordance with historical grammar because the metre is regular; therefore the metre is regular and final -e's are pronounced in accordance with historical grammar.<sup>15</sup>

The scholars who have fallen into this sort of reasoning have tried to show the consistency of the metre with the grammar. E.T. Donaldson, for example, says that "within the verse the test of metre is a far better indication of whether a poet wished an -e pronounced than the spelling of the scribes."<sup>16</sup> This statement is in the Urry-Tyrwhitt tradition; like them (apart from his being incidentally an editor of Chaucer's poetry) Donaldson assumes that the metre is regular and bases his argument for the sounding of -e on this.

13 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 83..

14 Tyrwhitt, "An Essay", cited in Robinson, op. cit., p. 84.

15 Robinson, p. 90.

16 Donaldson, "Chaucer's Final -E", p. 1123.

The metrical argument cannot stand as evidence; nor, as Mr Robinson has shown, can that based on rhyme. Chaucer does not rhyme words with final-e and those without except in The Tale of Sir Thopas; thus one assumes that the rhymes "chivalrye / murily" and "grace / was" in that tale must have been used for comic effect. If the -e's were not sounded the rhymes would not be comic, and from this scholars infer that all -e's are to be pronounced within and at the end of Chaucer's lines. This is, however, a tenuous argument. The -e's in the Sir Thopas rhymes may well have been sounded for a special effect but this does not justify one's sounding them elsewhere. Or perhaps the -e's here did not have syllabic value; they may simply have been signs to indicate a phonemic difference between the preceding vowel of a word and the same vowel in a rhyme-word without final -e. Mr Robinson accounts for the unique Sir Thopas rhymes as follows:

Chaucer separates words with a possible -e from words without -e not because he insists on -e's being sounded but precisely because he wishes to leave the question of sounding open. Had he rhymed words with and without -e he would have settled the question and forced those who wished to sound to spoil the rhyme.<sup>17</sup>

This seems quite convincing, as do other of Mr Robinson's arguments in favour of a generally silent -e. His view of final -e is the exact opposite of the traditional one: "Per-

17 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 86.

haps -e was sometimes called into being in certain circumstances, which is very different from saying that it was sometimes dropped."<sup>18</sup> This implies a stylistic criterion in place of a grammatical one for judging whether or not -e's should be sounded; any theory of final -e must show that it makes the verse more expressive. With this in mind I shall now examine some individual lines and passages from The Book of the Duchess.

In line 30, "But men myght axe me / why so", is the -e of "axe" to be sounded or not? If so, the line could be scanned as regular iambic tetrameter: "But men myght <sup>u</sup><sub>u</sub> <sup>u</sup><sub>u</sub> axe <sup>u</sup><sub>u</sub> me / why <sup>u</sup><sub>u</sub> so". Can one really believe though that this is how Chaucer read the line or would have wanted it read by others? The metrical regularity of it is wooden and unexpressive, and results in an unnatural stress on "me". If, however, the -e of "axe" is not sounded the word receives greater emphasis from falling between two words of lighter stress, "myght" and "me". It seems altogether fitting that "me" should not be stressed: the dreamer is telling us about men asking him something and would not seem to require emphasising that it is he ("me") who is being questioned. Furthermore, a reading in which the -e of "axe" is sounded neglects the manuscript punctuation. The virgule indicates a pause between a principal clause ("But men myght axe me") and a subordinate

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18 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 100.

noun clause ("why so I may not slepe"). Sounding the -e of "axe" lessens the effect of juncture between these clauses and the enjambment of the final foot of line 30 into the following line. Also, disyllabic "axe" disturbs the simplicity of diction, very effective here, seen in the collocation of monosyllabic words. All this is to say that from a stylistic point of view "axe" is a bad and unimaginative reading; in another context, the word might well be effective if read as two syllables.

The following lines (32-3) present a further problem if a certain -e is sounded. Remembering the accepted rule from Urry and Tyrwhitt on, the scansion of these lines would be:

But nāthēlēs, whōe ḫaske this  
Lēsēth his ḫasking trewly

B.D. 32-3

(I have inserted a parenthetical weak stress above the w in "trewnly" because Skeat and Robinson introduce another e into the word to make it trisyllabic. This emendation is discussed briefly below.) Sounding the -e of "aske" gives us an iambic tetrameter line but is syntactically unjustified. If pronounced, this -e becomes the thesis of the final foot of the line, the main stress being on "this". But because there is a trochaic inversion in the first foot of line 33 "aske this" is inappropriate; two stresses falling together in such a way produces a slight pause at the end of the line which is not required by the syntax of the verse. As prose,

"whoe aske this Leseth his asking trewly" demands no juncture between "this" and "Leseth", and if recited properly the verse here is colloquial and chatty in a way that justifies the use of prose rhythms. The unwarranted hiatus from sounding the -e of "aske", not to mention the concomitant unnatural stressing of "this", shows the danger of basing one's ideas about the metre or rhythm of Chaucer's short line on the single verse rather than on a succession of verses.

I cannot understand the emendation of "trewly" (33) to "trewely" in the editions of Skeat and Robinson. If it is to make the new e the thesis of a final foot whose arsis is the syllable -ly, it is simply a ludicrous genuflection before the iambic altar. No matter how many syllables we may think the word possessed (and w here may have had a semi-disyllabic value) it is hard to believe its ever being stressed on the final syllable. If it is to make a line of eight syllables, preserving the octosyllabic fallacy, then it is even more unjustified for there is not even a metrical reason for its being there. One of these two things must have been in the editors' minds, particularly Robinson's, since in line 35 he gives the form "trewly", apparently to conform with the nominally iambic metre.

Line 34 in the Skeat and Robinson editions again shows the danger of emending in favour of a "preconceived

prosodic principle". In both editions the line appears to be regular iambic tetrameter: "Myselven can not tell why". But the manuscript version "My seluen can not tell why", in which "tell" is without a final -e, does not support such a scansion. Final -e has been introduced to make the line metrically regular; in so doing the editors have made it more difficult for us to hear the poet's speaking voice. If "tell" is monosyllabic the line could be scanned as follows (./ indicates juncture): "My seluen ./ can not tell why". This reading is, I believe, better than that possible from the Skeat and Robinson editions because it stresses the important words ("not" rather than "can"), allows for an effective dramatic pause after "My seluen", and moves more quickly toward the final part of the sentence in the next line. Though lines 34-5 are unfortunately not punctuated in MS. Fairfax 16 one can imagine virgules after "My seluen" and "The southe" to indicate a slight pause:

My seluen./can not tell why

The southe, / but trewly as I gesse                    B.D. 34-5

"can not tell why The southe" is then a rhythmic unit and in all likelihood would have been recited without any pause at the end of line 34. Not only does the emendation of "tell" to "telle" suggest a regular iambic metre which obscures the real rhythm of the verse, it also checks the speed of the dreamer's narrative by putting a disyllabic

word in a series of monosyllables. One wonders if it is worth sacrificing expressiveness for metrical regularity.

I do not wish to suggest, however, that in The Book of the Duchess all final -e's beyond those elided or apocopated should not be sounded. There are some occasions when pronouncing these vowels is quite effective. The following line, for example, part of Alcyone's supplication to Juno, would benefit by sounding the -e's in "yeve" and "grace": "And yeve me grace / my lord to se" (111). The impression of greater solemnity one gets from reading the line in this way justifies the scansion. But there is a further reason for wanting to sound the -e's here, and it concerns the rhythm of the verse. The second half of line 111 seems to be composed of two iambic feet: "my lord to se". Line 111 though is not syntactically complete, for it needs the adverb "Soone" at the beginning of the next line. The complete syntactic unit, or period, is:

And yeve my grace / my lord to se

Soone / . . .

B.D. 111-12

If "to se" were actually an iambic foot the movement of the verse would be broken by the resultant pause, not required by the syntax, between two stressed syllables ("to se Soone"). In my scansion of line 111, in which rhythm and syntax correspond, the dactylic foot "lord to se" continues the rhythmic pattern established earlier in the line ("yeve my grace / my . . ."), thus supporting the contention,

on stylistic grounds, that the -e's here are to be sounded.

The above examples should show that we cannot use the sounding of final -e as evidence in determining the sort of line Chaucer wrote in The Book of the Duchess. His use of -e is arbitrary -- a stylistic device rather than a metrical one -- and can help us only to a better understanding of the sense and tone of the verse. The old rule is too inflexible to help us read the poetry as Chaucer himself might have. I agree with Ian Robinson when he says that

The reason for sounding -e's is that to do so helps the expressiveness of Chaucer's poetry . . . All our metrical arguments are based on the way we read and are successful only if they lead back to an improved reading. If the opposite occurs, the argument is wrong.<sup>19</sup>

His advice is:

. . . do not sound the -e's in rhyme (or anywhere else) unless you can make them sound right . . . if the metre seems to demand an -e sound it, but if the resulting reading damages the poetry, suspect the metre that led to it.<sup>20</sup>

I have for some time suspected the four-beat iambic metre of the octosyllabic couplet, and in the following chapter shall give an alternative description of Chaucer's short line.

19 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 108.

20 Loc. cit.

## II

### METRE OR RHYTHM?

If, as I have argued, Chaucer left the question of sounding final -e open, the short line of The Book of the Duchess is neither consistently iambic nor octosyllabic. And if the variable stress of certain French loan words insisted on by scholars since Tyrwhitt is in like manner debatable, the theory that Chaucer wrote more or less regular iambic lines is even harder to accept. In his "Essay on the Language and Versification of Chaucer" Tyrwhitt states that

The restoring of Chaucer's words to their just number of syllables, by the methods which have been pointed out above [chiefly the sounding of final -e], will often be of service in restoring his accents to their proper places . . . [In addition] I am persuaded that in his French words he most commonly laid his accents according to the French custom . . .<sup>1</sup>

Briefly, the theory of variable stress is that the accentuation of words borrowed into English from French had by Chaucer's time not yet settled down, so that the main stress of such words could move freely about without seeming unnatural; "nature", for example, could presumably be either an iamb or a trochee. It is as difficult to prove that this was actually the case as to prove that final -e's in late fourteenth-century English were generally sounded. Again, it is assumed that Chaucer wrote metrically regular

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Five Hundred Years, vol. 1, p. 445.

verse and that this can be used as evidence:

. . . from verse-stress certain conclusions can be drawn as to word accent, for an all-pervading characteristic of English verse is what Scripture [a man's name] . . . terms the Prose Principle, expressed by Young . . . in the following way: "Within a foot stress must not contravene accent."<sup>2</sup>

The argument for variable stress is as circular as that for final -e; as Ian Robinson has remarked, "the question of variable stress only arises at all because we are reading metrically."<sup>3</sup> If in the following couplet we had no expectations of iambic metre would we accent the final syllables of the rhyme-words, as the scansion suggests:

Hit was gret wonder that nature

Myght suffre / any creature

B.D. 467-8

It seems more appropriate here to accent the rhyme-words on the first syllable and to read the lines with speech-rhythms rather than metrically:

Hit was gret wonder that nature

Myght suffre / any creature

This reading evokes the dreamer's state of wonderment and confusion more convincingly than is possible from a regular iambic scansion. Though our conditioning to variable stress in Chaucer's verse might make the metrical reading acceptable, would one be satisfied with having the final syllables

<sup>2</sup> Bror Danielsson, Studies on the Accentuation of Poly-syllabic Latin, Greek and Romance Loan-words in English (Stockholm, 1948), p. 2, cited in Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 111.

accented, as marked, of the loan words in this prose passage?

. . . it is not to repreve in yevynge of juggement, ne  
in vengeaunce takyng, when it is sufficeant and reson-  
able./<sup>4</sup>

I think not; such a reading runs counter to the natural prose rhythms. Similarly in the above couplet from The Book of the Duchess, the licence afforded by variable stress leads to a monotonous iambic beat which robs the verse of its effectiveness. The rhythmical scansion seems stylistically preferable.

The rules for final -e and variable stress are no help to us if we wish to read this poetry as Chaucer might have; they exist merely to confirm a "preconceived prosodic principle". Is then the short line of The Book of the Duchess metrical or not? If neither iambic tetrameter nor octosyllabic, what sort of line is it? As a first step toward answering these questions I give below three scensions of the opening seven lines of the poem: as iambic tetrameter, as rhythmical verse, and as prose. In the prose version only the accented syllables are marked; manuscript punctuation is retained.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> The Tale of Melibee, 2223-6.

Haue grete wonder / be this lyghte  
 How that I lyve / for day ne nyghte  
 I may nat slepe / wel nygh noght  
 I have so many / an ydel thoght  
 Purely / for defaulte of slepe  
 That by my trouthe / I take no kepe  
 Of noo thinge / how hyt cometh or gooth      B.D. 1-7

Haue grete wonder / be this lyghte  
 How that I lyve / for day ne nyghte  
 I may nat slepe / wel nygh noght  
 I have so many / an ydel thoght  
 Purely / for defaulte of slepe  
 That by my trouthe / I take no kepe  
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Haue grete wonder / be this lyghte How that I lyve /  
 for day ne nyghte I may nat slepe / wel nygh noght I  
 have so many / an ydel thoght Purely / for defaulte of  
 slepe That by my trouthe / I take no kepe Of noo thinge /  
 how hyt cometh or gooth

There are twenty-eight stressed syllables in the metrical scansion, twenty-five each in the rhythmical and prose readings. Of these, twenty are common to metre and rhythm, twenty-three to rhythm and prose, and nineteen to prose and metre. It is useless to make inferences from such a short extract, but the pattern beginning to emerge

here would, I believe, be consistent throughout the poem. The thing to note is that the rhythmical reading partakes of the stress-patterns of both metre and prose. Though the proportion 20 (metre and rhythm) : 23 (rhythm and prose) : 19 (prose and metre) is close, reading aloud shows the rhythmical and prose versions to be more compatible than either is with the metrical one. The metrical version is stilted and unnatural, and the prose not particularly expressive. There is some kind of metrical basis to the rhythmical reading, though not iambic, which makes it much more effective than the prose. This perhaps comes from a compromise between the expectation of metrical regularity and the rhythms of ordinary speech. Is it not more likely that Chaucer would have recited this verse rhythmically, or are we still to assume, as many have since the eighteenth century, that metrical regularity is in itself preferable?

There are two sorts of evidence to justify the contention that the short line of The Book of the Duchess is rhythmical. First, there is the large body of verse before and contemporaneous with Chaucer which is not metrical; and second, there is the evidence of manuscript punctuation. Until very recently both these areas were neglected in favour of historical phonology and eighteenth-century theories of versification.

It is generally acknowledged that Chaucer's short line shows the influence of both French syllabic verse and

the native accentual measure (romances, homilies, alliterative epics, and the like). This view is concisely stated by Paull F. Baum in his recent book on Chaucer's verse:

In a word, the meter of BD [The Book of the Duchess] and HF] [The House of Fame] is midway between the syllabism of the French octosyllabic and the freedom (or incompetence) of the minstrels' work. It is accentual, yet restricted by such canons of correctness and smoothness as he preferred when writing the five-stress line (which is not lewed). One might call it a compromise if the word did not have disagreeable connotations.<sup>5</sup>

But Professor Baum does not examine the proposed compromise very closely, instead affirming that "The couplets of BD are four-stress iambic, with the usual elisions and contractions and no more than the usual forced or misplaced stresses".<sup>6</sup> The compromise seems to have been invoked to account for a relatively large number of seemingly irregular lines in The Book of the Duchess. Chaucer was, it is assumed, trying to work two systems together, not always successfully. Professor Baum speaks of

the goodly number [of lines] which without such warning [elision, syncope, anaepestic substitution] seem really irregular and which have left a bad impression. Properly considered they illustrate the latitude which Chaucer permitted himself in this meter.<sup>7</sup>

If certain lines from The Book of the Duchess have left a bad impression it is more likely a result of expecting to

5 Baum, Chaucer's Verse, p. 28.

6 Loc. cit.

7 Ibid., p. 29.

find a metre which is not really there than of being unaware of methods which set right the irregularities. Professor Baum's iambic-octosyllabic norm is a Procrustean bed on which he tries to place "irregular" longer and shorter lines: "A few lines which might be seven-syllabled are remedied by invoking hiatus . . . . There are other lines which are reduced to order by elision"<sup>8</sup> (my italics). His insistence on remedies echoes a remark made by Bernhard ten Brink in his still widely accepted account of Chaucer's metre:

The MSS. afford --- especially in the Deeth of Blaunche --- several verses which only violent slurring could reduce to the correct number of syllables, i.e. which contain a disyllabic arsis. But the majority may easily be emended, as was in some cases done already in the Urry edition.<sup>9</sup>

If Chaucer's verses do not always seem right according to the model, then it must be Chaucer or his scribes who are at fault. It is amazing that this idea has persisted for so long. Instead of attempting to accommodate the lines of The Book of the Duchess into some preconceived notion of what they should be (the "metrical background"<sup>10</sup> which Professor Baum is confident is there) and speaking of irregularities, is it not better to suspect the metre which leads to these irregularities?

8 Baum, Chaucer's Verse, p. 30.

9 ten Brink, Language and Metre, p. 209.

10 Baum, p. 30.

For one thing, the contention that Chaucer was influenced by French octosyllabic verse is suspect. It is a too easily acceptable theory because very few people know both medieval French and English poetry well enough to judge its appropriateness in discussing Chaucer's short line; like the rule for final -e, it is simply acknowledged as a fact. Ian Robinson offers several cogent arguments against acceptance of this theory,<sup>11</sup> but for the present it is enough to give his restatement of J.G. Southworth's claim that "the attempt to come to Chaucer from French has never succeeded in improving anyone's reading of Chaucer." Robinson notes that "Southworth's attack [in Verses of Cadence] on all the important works that argue from French to Chaucer is convincing".<sup>12</sup> My own French is not up to the performing of detailed comparative linguistics; however, my major objection to looking to French is that there is pre-Chaucerian syllabic or metrical verse in English which is more pertinent to a description of Chaucer's short line.

The Ormulum, written in the East Midland dialect very early in the thirteenth century, is composed of over 20,000 lines of regular foot-verse. Apart from the author's interesting system of orthography his consistent (and sopori-

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11 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, pp. 239-43 (Appendix).

12 Ibid., p. 239.

fic) metre provides material for syllabic rigorists and those who hold that the later verse of Chaucer is, or was meant to be, metrically regular. Orm's lines are metrical without our having to assume, for example, that final -e's in his time were sounded: they are metrical because he obviously meant them to be read that way and because syntactically they are not made better by a rhythmic scansion. The metre is rhymeless septenary, always with eight syllables in the first line and seven in the second. Here is a short extract from the poem:

An Romanisshe kaserr-king  
Wass Augusstuss 3ehatenn,  
Annd he wass wurrpenn kaserr-king  
Off all mannkinn onn erpe,  
Annd he gann pennkenn off himmsellf,  
Annd off hiss miccle riche. 13

From the scansion it is obvious that whatever the status of final -e in early thirteenth-century England Orm used the vowel as a syllable: the question of sounding or not sounding is not left open as in Chaucer. Not pronouncing the -e's and reading the lines rhythmically -- that is, with the rhythms of speech, accenting the syllables of certain words

<sup>13</sup> Bennett and Smithers, eds., Early Middle English Verse and Prose, p. 175, ll. 1-6. Other passages quoted from this edition are identified by the abbreviation E.M.E.V.P. In extracts from The Ormulum, g has been used to represent the letter y.

unmetrically -- does not make the verse more expressive:

An Romanisse kaserr-king

Wass Augusstuss 3ehatenn,

Annd he wass wurrþenn kaserr-king

Off all mannkinn onn erþe,

1-4

Orm closely controls the way his verse is to be *read*.

It is his own interpretation of the poem.

What interests me about The Ormulum is that from what I have read of it there is no phrasal movement within individual lines; that is, there are no pauses within the line demanded by the syntax and no enjambment. A slight pause comes at the end of the eight-syllable line because of the terminal stress, and a longer pause after the seven-syllable line marking the completion of a syntactic unit:

Ham shollde wendenn to patt tun  
patt he wass borenn inne,<sup>14</sup>

If one adds another syllable to the seven-syllable line the unrhymed couplet so formed has the sort of rhythm which traditional prosodists would like to see in the couplets of The

14 E.M.E.V.P., p. 174.

15 Ibid., p. 175, ll. 21-2.

Book of the Duchess. But unlike Orm's, Chaucer's syntax does not support a metrically regular reading. Is there poetry before Chaucer in which some attempt is made to combine foot-verse and phrasal movement?

The Bestiary, a late thirteenth-century poem in the East Midland dialect, is a curious blend of metrical and alliterative verse: "it often uses regular verse in feet to translate Latin rithmus and alliteratives for Latin quantitatives."<sup>16</sup> In the following excerpt the metrical pattern is obvious:

/    ^    /    ^    /    ^    /  
Al is man so is tis ern  
/    ^    /    ^    /    ^    /  
-- Wulde ge nu listen --  
/    ^    /    ^    /    ^    /  
Old in his sinnes dern  
/    ^    /    ^    /    ^    /  
Or he bicumeð Cristen.  
/    ^    /    ^    /    ^    /  
And tus he neweð him ðis man,  
/    ^    /    ^    /    ^    /  
Danne he nimeð to kirke.  
/    ^    /    ^    /    ^    /  
Or he it bedenken can  
/    ^    /    ^    /    ^    /  
His egen weren mirke.<sup>17</sup>

Though the verse is not as doggedly regular as Orm's, there is within the abab rhyme scheme a similar cadence. Using the virgule as a unit of juncture, with // and /// to indicate longer pauses respectively, one can see the following pattern in this section of The Bestiary: a / b // a / b ///.

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16 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 176.

17 E.M.E.V.P., pp. 167-8, ll. 36-43.

According to this notation the lines of The Ormulum could be described thus (x represents the final word of the line as Orm does not use rhyme): x / x // x / x // etc. In both poems the lines following a single virgule, a relatively short pause, usually begin with a conjunction, relative pronoun, or some other connecting word. The close correspondence of metre and syntax is quite clear.

But there are also parts of The Bestiary written in a free alliterative style in which the rhythms are closer to those of speech. The passage below is from Natura for-nice (I have inserted virgules to indicate juncture):

Ðe mire is magti; / mikel ge swinkeð  
 In sumer and in softe weder, / so we ofte sen hauen.  
 In ðe heruest / hardilike gangeð,  
 And renned rapelike, / and rested hire seldom,  
 And feched hire fode / ðer ge it mai finden.<sup>18</sup>

The author's alliterative intention is plain. Unlike the significacio discussed above there is a recognisable half-line movement, each half-line having generally two beats, which brings the rhythm and syntax close together. One could easily recite the opening lines as prose: "Ðe mire is magti / mikel ge swinkeð In sumer and in softe weder / so we often sen hauen." The second of these three phrases

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18 E.M.E.V.P., pp. 168-9, ll. 68-72.

runs over from the end of one line to the beginning of another in a way that is not possible in strictly metrical or syllabic verse. In regular foot-verse the metre keeps the verse flowing smoothly but tends to limit syntactic constructions to the individual line. The possibility of arranging the beats in an alliterative line so that a number of weak syllables can follow the final beat means that, in theory at least, there is more likelihood of run-on lines (as in the lines quoted as prose above) in this measure. As I shall show later, however, alliterative lines are not generally characterised by enjambment.

If the two passages I have chosen from The Bestiary represent two distinct verse traditions, there are also sections of the poem in which these traditions are combined. One can see this mixture in, for example, the significacio to Natura categrandie (the lines are scanned with final -e's sounded, and I have added virgules):

Dis deuel is mikel / wið wil and magt,  
 So witches hauen / in here craft.  
 He doð men hungrén / and hauen ðrist,  
 And mani oder sinful list;  
 Tolled men to him / wið his onde.  
 Woso him foleged / he findeð sonde:  
 Ðó arm ðe little, / in leue lage.<sup>19</sup>

Here the lines seem recognisably metrical ("So witches hauen  
in here craft") though they may contain from eight to eleven  
syllables. But the feet are not consistent enough to jus-  
tify describing them as iambic, as one might feel can be  
done with the significacio quoted earlier. What we can say  
of these lines is that for the most part they consist of a  
balance of two phrases, though not as obviously as in the  
alliterative measure, and have a consistent rhyme scheme  
(aabb etc.). The first two lines, for example, have a  
slight medial pause:

Dis deuel is mikel / wið wil and magt,  
So witches hauen / in here craft. 183-4

In both cases (and in other lines also) the pause falls be-  
tween two weak syllables and is syntactically justified,  
separating the initial principal clause from a subordinate  
adverb clause. Rather than trying to find some signs of a  
more or less regular metre, it is more important to note  
that each half-line consists of two beats and that the first  
half-line shows greater metrical variety than the second:

Dis deuel is mikel / wið wil and magt	183
Tolleð men to him / wið his onde	187
Woso him folegeð / he findeð sonde	188
Woso festað / hope on him	195

Considering the quite definite phrasal movement and the un-  
metrical placing of stresses in the first half-line, this  
verse is best seen as rhythmical rather than metrical.

That is, there is a consistent number of stresses, usually on the important words, and a noticeable cadence which corresponds with the syntax. But though rhythmical the lines here are for the most part single-verse units; in a different way, there is as little enjambment as in the consistent syllabic verse of Orm. This no doubt results in part from the purpose of the significacio in The Bestiary; after having described an animal the author wishes to point out its moral and theological significance and does so in brief didactic statements.

Perhaps the impression of this significacio being largely a succession of single verses, despite the rhyme scheme, also derives from its owing more to the alliterative measure than later verse which is also rhythmical. I have mentioned earlier that enjambment such as is found in The Book of the Duchess is generally not characteristic of alliterative verse. Here, for example, are the opening lines of Piers Plowman:

In a somer seson · whan soft was the sonne,  
I shope me in shroudes · as I a shepe were,  
In habite as an heremite · vnholy of workes,  
Went wyde in bis world · wondres to here.<sup>20</sup>

Though the rhythm of these lines is closer to ordinary speech than that of The Ormulum and other syllabic and met-

<sup>20</sup> Skeat, ed., *Piers Plowman*, p. 1, ll. 1-4.

rical verse, the heavy beats, underscored by the alliteration, establish a cadence within the single line which audibly isolates it from other lines. This cadence noticeably affects the syntax: the important words of a phrase are always made to come together within the half-line. One seldom finds nouns and adjectives separated, or such a construction as the following from The Book of the Duchess:

And I ne may / ne nyght ne morwe  
Slepe / . . .

B.D. 22-3

It would seem that the verse of Chaucer's earliest extended poem combines the rhythms and phrasal movement of the alliterative line with the continuity and regularity of rhymed metrical verse. This is not to say, however, that Chaucer was necessarily conscious of the traditions he was mixing; it is hardly likely that he simply tried to fit alliterative rhythms into metrical lines. I am only saying that the rhythms come ultimately from native English alliterative verse.

There are poems before Chaucer which also combine rhythm and metre; of particular interest is The Owl and the Nightingale, believed to have been written by Nicholas of Guildford in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Ian Robinson has said of this poem that

The problem solved in [it] was how to make flexible anything as stiff as this metre usually was in the popular romances, how to make it the measure of a witty and frivolous poem acceptable to people of French cultivation. To do so the author pulled the metre in the

direction of the spoken language by making his metrical lines also rhythmic units that might conceivably be spoken.<sup>21</sup>

The verse is generally octosyllabic with several instances of seven- and nine-syllable lines, and is in rhyming couplets. Though the poem can be read with a more or less regular iambic metre there is much evidence of a half-line, or phrasal, movement within the lines. In the following passage I have tried to indicate this movement by using virgules to separate the half-lines:

þat plait was stif/an starc an strong,  
 Sumwile softe / an lud among;  
 An eiper aȝen oper sval  
 An let þat vuelte mod ut al;  
 An eiper seide / of operes custe  
 þat alreworste / þat he wuste;  
 An hure an hure / of operes songe<sup>22</sup>  
 Hi holde plaiding / suþe stronge.

The half-line movement appears to be controlled and used for special effects in contrast with purely metrical verse. In lines 5-6, for example, there is a quite definite balance of phrases which invites us to pause after "stif" and "softe" and so read the verse slowly and emphatically (especially given the alliteration of "starc an strong"), perhaps to suggest the mock-seriousness of the debate. In the following lines (7-8), however, the phrasal balance is dropped in favour of lines that can be recited more quickly.

21 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 178.

22 E.M.E.V.P., pp. 2-3, ll. 5-12.

The dialogue in The Owl and the Nightingale often closely approximates the rhythms of speech:

'Hule,' ho seide, 'seie me sop:  
 Wi dostu pat unwiȝtis dop?  
 þu singist aniȝt an noȝt adai,  
 An al bi song is "wailawai".  
 þu miȝt mid þine song afere  
 Alle pat ihereþ þine ibere;

173-8

The half-line movement is again evident in several of these lines. Though working within fairly strict metrical bounds the author has avoided the monotony of regular foot-verse such as Orm's and has managed to make his verse expressive. Is not The Book of the Duchess partly in this tradition of English verse rather than French? The pre-Chaucerian poetry discussed so far has included foot-verse, the alliterative measure, mixtures of syllabic and metrical tive verse, and four-beat metrical verse with a number of balanced half-lines. It seems probabl. that Chaucer owes more to these traditions than to French octosyllabics.

Having said this, here are the opening lines of The Book of the Duchess once again, scanned rhythmically:

Haue grete wonder / be this lyghte  
 How that I lyve / for day ne nyghte  
 I may nat slepe / wel nygh noght  
 I have so many / an ydel thoght  
 Purely / for defaulte of slepe  
 That by my trouthe / I take no kepe  
 Of noo thinge / how hyt cometh or gooth      B.D. 1-7

If some lines from The Bestiary and The Owl and the Nightingale are set beside this passage one can see comparable half-line phrasal balances (indicated here by virgules):

Dis deuel is mikel / wið wil and magt,

So witches hauen / in here craft.

He doð men hungren / and hauen ðrist,<sup>23</sup>

bat plait was stif / an starc an strong,

Sumwile softe / an lud among;<sup>24</sup>

Despite similar phrasal balance, however, Chaucer's verse is freer and more rhythmical than either of these, and unlike them demands a dramatic recitation. His verse is closer to the rhythms of speech; the beats fall naturally on the important words without giving the impression of badly wrenching a metrical pattern.

What then can be said of Chaucer's short line? There is a metrical pattern, nominally iambic tetrameter, which is nevertheless not consistently enough adhered to for one to say convincingly that the lines are metrical. What seems most significant about the short line is that it generally consists of four beats arranged rhythmically rather than metrically and balanced phrases. A useful term for conveying this information would be "balanced tetrameter" line,

23 E.M.E.V.P., p. 172, ll. 183-5.

24 Ibid., p. 2, ll. 5-6.

which I shall use from now on when referring to the metre of The Book of the Duchess.

Of course, not all the lines of the poem are balanced tetrameters; there are some with only three beats, some with five, and several without phrasal balance. The variety of lines which resist a metrical reading show Chaucer to have been interested at this early stage in approximating conversational rhythms. In the following passage, for example, the majority of lines are clearly balanced tetrameters (marked by +), though MS. Fairfax 16 does not punctuate them,<sup>25</sup> and might even be iambic:

- + Soe it befall, thereafter soone
- + This king wollwenden ouer see
- + To tellen shortly, whan that he
- + Was in the see, thus in this wise
- + Soche a tempest gan to rise
- + That brake her maste and made it fal
- + And cleft ther ship, and dreint hem all
- 3 That neuer was founde, as it telles
- + Borde ne man, ne nothing elles
- 5 Right thus this king Seyes loste his life B.D. 66-75

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25 That is, they are not punctuated in the same way as most other lines of the poem. In MS. Fairfax 16, lines 31-96 are in a later hand; the virgule is not used, but there are several commas which seem to be rhetorical marks. Their purpose is not to indicate phrasal balance.

The two lines which do not have either four beats or phrasal balance are, however, stylistically justified. It is not at all a case of Chaucer's incompetence in sustaining a fairly regular rhythmical pattern; the lines do not need to be "remedied" or "reduced to order". In my reading of line 73 there are three heavily stressed syllables and five weak (or six, if "telles" is considered disyllabic). After telling of the sinking of Seys's ship, which is enacted through the emphatic beats and simple syntax (with very definite half-line movement), Chaucer gives a line which is to be recited more quickly. Here the three beats are separated by two lightly-stressed syllables, and apart from a slight pause after "founde" to indicate a parenthetical comment by the narrator, there is no important juncture. The dreamer is anxious to tell the audience the results of this calamity: "bord ne man ne nothing elles" resumes the rhythmic pattern, emphasising the completeness of the sinking. The breathless quality of line 73 is purposeful and effective; read properly, it reveals the dreamer's interest in the events he is describing.

Line 75, having five beats and no phrasal balance, is also an effective variation. The length of the line (nine syllables as compared with seven or eight), the contiguous stresses ("king Seyes loste"), and the slight pause after "thus" require it to be read more slowly and deliberately. The dreamer has come to an important piece of infor-

mation and wishes to emphasise it before turning to Alcyone and her predicament.

When the dreamer shifts his attention from Seys to Alcyone he does so in a very conversational style. The following lines, in which I have used virgules to indicate pauses, come close to the rhythms of ordinary speech:

- 4 Now for to speake of Alcyone / his wife  
3 This Lady / that was left at home  
2 Hath wonder, / that the king ne come  
3 Home, / for it was a long terme B.D. 76-9

The verse is too free rhythmically to be characterised as balanced tetrameter. The syntax spills over from one line to the next, creating a pause after the first beat in the line and not the second. It is useless to attempt to fit such verse into any pattern; the best one can do is to note the rhythms and judge their appropriateness to the sense of the lines.

There are, however, several instances of run-on lines which are balanced tetrameters. In the following couplet there is no pause at the end of the first line:

- + This god of slepe / with hys on ye  
+ Caste vp / and axed / who clepeth there B.D. 184-5

Here the medial virgules in the manuscript indicate phrasal balance; the first virgule in line 185 is rhetorical, telling the reader to make a major pause after "Caste vp". If the heavy and weak stresses of this couplet are written out

in a single line, retaining the virgules which mark phrasal balance, one finds a balanced tetrameter between two half-lines:  $\text{v} \text{v} \text{v} \text{v} / \text{v} \text{v} \text{v} \text{v} ; \text{v} \text{v} \text{v} \text{v} / \text{v} \text{v} \text{v} \text{v}$ . This pattern occurs elsewhere,

- + How that I lyve / for day ne nyghte
- + I may nat slepe / wel nygh noght B.D. 2-3
- + This messenger / come fleynge faste
- + And cried .O. how / a-wake anoon B.D. 178-9

but it is more usual to find a 2-3-2 or 2-3-3 pattern of stresses in which the first line is balanced tetrameter and the second is not:

- + That by my trouthe / I take no kepe
- 3 Of noo thinge / how hyt cometh or gooth B.D. 6-7
- + To wete eke why / hyt was a-drad
- 3 By kynde / and for to make hyt glad B.D. 493-4
- + Hys hewe chaunge / and wexe grene
- 4 And pale,/ for ther noo bloode ys sene B.D. 497-8
- + And I sawe that / and gan me aqueynt
- 3 With hym / and fonde hym so tretable B.D. 532-3
- + So turneth she / hyr fals whele
- 3 Aboute / for hyt ys no thynge stable B.D. 644-5
- + That they ne yive me / a yifte echon
- 3 Of wepynge / whan I am allon B.D. 695-6

+ Hir eyen semed / anoon she wolde  
 4 Have mercy / foolys wenden soo B.D. 866-7

+ And chefe ensample / of al hir werke  
 3 And moustre / for be yet neuer so derke B.D. 911-12

+ And byd him faste / anoon that he  
 3 Goo hoodeles / in-to the drye se B.D. 1027-8

The criterion for selecting these passages is simply syntactic carry-over, and has nothing to do with rhyme. My selection may seem arbitrary, and one might point out that the pattern described here is not confined to couplets but occurs also in longer passages. The couplet has been used as the smallest unit showing this rhythmical movement. The passages quoted above suggest that Chaucer placed more importance on a succession of lines than on individual lines, that in so doing he was trying to approximate the rhythms of speech, and that he found the balanced tetrameter line the most flexible for this purpose.

The basic balanced tetrameter -- that is, a line of four beats with phrasal balance -- is most regular in purely descriptive or narrative passages:

- + My wyndowes were / shette echon
- + And throgh the glas / the sonne shon
- + Vpon my bed; / with bryght bemys
- + With many glade / gilde stremys
- + And eke the welken / was so faire

4 Blew bryght clere / was the ayre  
 + And ful attempre / for sothe hyt was  
 + For nother to colde / nor hoote yt was  
 3 Ne in al the welkene / was a clowde

B.D. 335-43

+ And I hym folwed / and hyt forthe went  
 + Dovne by a floury / grene went  
 + Ful thikke of gras / ful softe and swete  
 + With flourys fele / faire vnder fete  
 + And litel vsed / hyt semed thus  
 2 For both Flora / and Zephirus  
 + They two that make / floures growe  
 + Had made her dwellynge / ther I trowe  
 + For hit was / on to be-holde  
 + As thogh therthe / envye wolde  
 2 To be gayer / than the heven  
 + To have moo floures / swche seven  
 + As in the walkene / sterris bee  
 + Hyt had forgete / the pouertee  
 3 That wynter thorgh / hys colde morwes  
 3 Had made hyt suffre / and his sorwes

B.D. 397-412

It is clear that the rhythmical cadence of the balanced tetrameter line allowed Chaucer greater freedom in accenting words on their usual syllables and in carrying over the sense of the verse from one line to the next.

Had the verse been metrically regular and the half-line

movement not evident, The Book of the Duchess would not have the same intimate, conversational quality. Chaucer's use of a rhythmical line brings out the speaker's voice clearly, more so than in metrical verse both before and contemporaneous with his poetry. Because the lines are not metrical syntactic constructions are not limited to the individual line or couplet, but can and do begin and end anywhere within the line. An understanding of the relationship between rhythm and syntax can help us to read the verse as Chaucer and his contemporaries might have and so to determine a character's attitude not only by what he says, but how he says it. In the following chapter I shall examine rhythm and syntax in The Book of the Duchess.

But before doing so there is one head of evidence still to be considered in showing that Chaucer's short line is rhythmical rather than metrical. On several occasions in the present chapter I have resorted to manuscript punctuation for an explanation of how the lines in The Book of the Duchess might have been read. Though medieval punctuation is not yet a subject in which certainties are possible, it is generally held that the function of the virgule, the most common punctuation mark, was to indicate the caesural pause. In The Book of the Duchess its use in this respect often coincides with what I believe to be its primary function of marking phrasal balance, though a medial virgule in

a balanced tetrameter line need not always represent junction. In the following couplet, for example, the virgules are syntactic markers used in each case to separate a principal clause from a subordinate noun clause:

- + And was so besy / hyr to serve
- + And pitee were / I shulde sterfe B.D. 1265-6

There are many instances of the virgule being used rhetorically, indicating to the reader where important pauses are to be made, as in the second line of the following couplets:

- + And I ne may / no nyght ne morwe
- 3 Slepe / and thys Melancolye B.D. 22-3
- + Were al the wyndowes / wel y-glasyd
- 4 Ful clere / and nat an hoole y-crasyd B.D. 323-4
- + To do hir knowe / and v[n]derstonde
- 3 My woo / and she wel vnderstode B.D. 1260-1
- 3 But yif myn hert / was I-waxe
- 4 Gladde , that is no nede to axe B.D. 1275-6

In the case of multiple virgules within a line its function is to make the important words stand out by slowing the speed of the verse, "In what wyse / how / why / and wherfore" (747); to set off parenthetical comments from the dialogue, " By oure lord / quod I / y trowe yow wel" (1042); to indicate a change of speaker, "She ys ded / nay / yis be my trouthe" (1309); to separate items in a series, "Men / hors / houndes / and other thynges" (349); or to mark phrasal balance in combination with any one of the above functions: "Of Paris / Eleyne / and of lavyne" (331). The second virgule in this line indicates a pause before the third name

and also makes clear the half-line movement, so that there is probably greater juncture here than after "Of Paris": "Of Paris / Eleyne // and of lavyne".

Though variously used the virgules in The Book of the Duchess primarily separate phrases in the balanced tetrameter line; in almost all cases they are aids to the oral reader and not simply inconsistent scribal peculiarities.

With respect to the long line of The Canterbury Tales, J.G. Southworth has remarked that "in those lines where the virgule is used, it does not always appear at the caesural pause. It is, therefore, a rhetorical and not a metrical mark"<sup>26</sup> --- a conclusion which C.S. Lewis had reached some years earlier.<sup>27</sup> Ian Robinson shares this opinion:

The good Chaucer manuscripts with their half-line stops look quite different from the editions. They createthe expectation that Chaucer's lines are to go in half-line phrases as well as lines . . . . Chaucer cannot be punctuated in the modern way. F.N. Robinson's attempts add colons and semi-colons to the text, quite arbitrarily; this peppering of punctuation does nothing whatever for reading. The really helpful punctuation is the medieval sort, the phrase-division.<sup>28</sup>

Considering the evidence of native poetic traditions which Chaucer inherited and the punctuation of the manuscripts, I think it fair to conclude that the verse of The Book of the Duchess is rhythmical rather than metrical and

26 Southworth, Verses of Cadence, p. 62.

27 Lewis, "The Fifteenth-century Heroic Line".

28 Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, pp. 144, 147.

that for the most part his tetrameter lines are balanced halves.

### III

#### RHYTHM AND SYNTAX

I have so far tried to show that Chaucer's short line is rhythmical, not metrical. It is safe to assume, I think, that Chaucer meant his verse to be recited dramatically; a description of his verse which works from this assumption should bring the reader closer to what Francis Berry has called the "physical voice" of the poet himself. In Poetry and the Physical Voice Professor Berry attempts to deduce such qualities of vocal expression as pitch, timbre, and intonation in order to characterise the distinctive voices of certain poets:

Through the totality of the printed signs on the page the poet conveys his voice. To respond to this totality -- the sense is included as well as the words since they are as inseparable as mind and body, the one is what it is because of, the other -- is an act of the auditory imagination.

This "act of the auditory imagination" is difficult if we read Chaucer's lines metrically. Traditional prosody does not allow us to hear Chaucer's voice or those of his characters because it is falsely based on the conventions of a later and very different age. Reading Chaucer in the modern editions of Skeat and Robinson with their rules for grammar and versification is not far removed from reading

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1 Berry, Poetry and the Physical Voice, pp. 193-4.

him in translation. One may think he can hear Chaucer in his "inner ear" by silently sounding the vowels in a fourteenth-century fashion, but by itself this is merely deliberate archaism and does not mean that one is at all close to the sort of recitation Chaucer would have given his poems. The "aural empathy"<sup>2</sup> which Professor Berry recommends can only be achieved by reading Chaucer's lines rhythmically and by appreciating how rhythm and syntax work together in a dramatic recitation.

Chaucer's verse -- and this is true of even an early poem like The Book of the Duchess -- is dramatic in two senses. First, it demands being read with the rhythms of ordinary speech; the stress-patterns and syntactic constructions are closer to the conversational style of common speech than those of alliterative verse such as Piers Plowman or metrical verse such as Gower's. Second, Chaucer's verse is dramatic to some extent because he is a narrative poet who "wrote words intended to be uttered through throats other than his own."<sup>3</sup> But Chaucer is not a dramatic poet in the same way Shakespeare is:

Chaucer composed, as far as we know, for himself as an actor, not for others as actors. Chaucer's own voice, when he read aloud to his audience, contained or included the differing voices of the Prioress, the Monk,

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2 See Ibid., p. 3: "What is aural empathy, that is, where, despite actual silence, there is present an illusion of vocal sound?"

3 Ibid., p. 117.

the Miller, etc. Inflecting his own voice, he would mimic the voices of his creatures . . . Yet Chaucer does not "put on" the Monk's vocal manner so completely as to deceive his hearers into thinking that he is doing more than imitate or mimic. If Chaucer had become the Monk, had ceased to contain the quoted voice of the Monk within his own, he would have ceased<sup>4</sup> to be a great narrative poet and become something else.

Professor Berry has made an important distinction between narrative and dramatic poetry, one which helps us to understand Chaucer's role in his poems and appreciate his own speaking voice. In The Book of the Duchess Chaucer is neither the dreamer nor the Black Knight, but that is not to say these figures are independent characters like those in a Shakespeare play. Chaucer speaks through them, and as such his own voice is everywhere discernible. He may not necessarily share their attitudes, but it must be understood that he is using these attitudes to make a point of his own. In all likelihood Chaucer declaimed his poems alone in front of an audience; they would be conscious of his presence all the time and realise that he was assuming different roles. It is in this sense that his poetry, The Book of the Duchess for example, is dramatic.

In a recent critical survey of Chaucer's works John Lawlor says that the modern reader must have a "readiness to hear the living voice from the page -- to treat Chaucer's text as predominantly an oral script, allowing and sustain-

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4 Ibid., pp. 117-18.

ing such distinct opportunities for an oral narrator as mime, gesture, change of tone, dramatic pause, and significant reticence.<sup>5</sup> The effect of mime and gesture on the performance must of course remain a matter of speculation, though they might be helpful to keep in mind when reading, but such things as change of tone and dramatic pause can be measured to some extent by looking closely at the grammar and prosody of the verse. The relationship between rhythm and syntax, which helps us to determine pitch, pace, and intonation, for example, is vital to our establishing the meaning of a particular poem. When we read the poem as Chaucer might have we shall know better how to interpret it. As one critic has observed, "There are many . . . passages in Chaucer in which the kinds of sentences employed, their simplicity or complexity, the contrasts between types of sentences employed by two speakers, or by one speaker when addressing different listeners within the scene, will indicate the dramatic effects which an oral reader might well aim to convey."<sup>6</sup>

In the preceding chapters I have attempted to show that the short line of The Book of the Duchess is rhythmical and as such supports a dramatic recitation. But there is

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5 Lawlor, Chaucer, p. 17.

6 Adey, "Rhythm and Syntax", p. 2.

much rhythmical verse which is not dramatic in the same way as Chaucer's. The rhythms of Piers Plowman, for example, are close to those of ordinary speech:

. . . for the modern reader Piers Plowman goes naturally into rhythms very like the ones we use in talking. As we read it, alliterative verse seems to work by a succession of rhythmic phrases, two in each line, which are balanced internally and against each other by the relation of their stresses.<sup>7</sup>

Though rhythmical, the verse of Piers Plowman does not present as many opportunities to the oral reader for dramatic effects as that of The Book of the Duchess. In the following excerpt from Passus I, a conversation between the dreamer and Lady Meed, prose rhythms are used but syntactic constructions are limited to the half-line or to the line:

I was aferd of her face : beiȝ she faire were,  
 And seide, 'mercy, Madame . what is pis to mene?'  
 'be toure vp be toft,' quod she . 'treuthe is pere-Inne,  
 And wolde bat ȝe wrouȝte . as his worde techeth;  
 For he is fader of feith . fourmed ȝow alle,  
 Bothe with fel and with face . and ȝaf ȝow fyue wittis  
 Forto worschip hym per-with . be while bat ȝe ben here.  
 And perfore he hyȝte be exthe . to help ȝow vchone  
 Of wollen, of lynnен . of lyflode at nede,  
 In mesurable manere . to make ȝow at ese;<sup>8</sup> 10-19

Each line is a recognisable rhythmic unit consisting of two phrases, each with two beats, alliteration, and junction between the phrases and at the end of the line. The syntax does not carry over from one line to the next, so

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, Chaucer's Prosody, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Skeat, ed., Piers the Plowman, p. 9.

that although the prose rhythms are evident the verse is not what one would call conversational. The formality of alliterative verse controls the range of effects which an oral reader could bring out in recitation; the lines are related to one another in a simple way syntactically, usually by a conjunction or relative pronoun. Though the verse of The Book of the Duchess owes something to the alliterative tradition Chaucer is much freer in his use of syntax. The half-line in a balanced tetrameter line is not necessarily a syntactic unit, and the relationship between successive lines more complex than in Piers Plowman. Metrical verse is hampered by similar syntactic limitations, as I shall show later with reference to Gower's Confessio Amantis. The sort of verse Chaucer used in The Book of the Duchess enabled him to use a variety of syntactic constructions, and it is worth paying these close attention.

The poem begins emphatically with the dreamer describing his present state of mind and body:

I Haue grete wonder / be this lyghte  
 How that I lyve / for day ne nyghte  
 I may nat slepe / wel nygh noght  
 I have so many / an ydel thoght  
 Purely / for defaulte of slepe  
 That by my trouthe / I take no kepe  
 Of noo thinge / how hyt cometh or gooth      B.D. 1-7

Three of the four major pauses in this opening section, which is composed of two periods, occur in the middle of the line: after "hym" (2), "slepe" (3), and "noo thinge" (7). The syntactic constructions are relatively simple, both peri-

ods consisting of two principal clauses joined by a conjunction ("for" (2) in the first and "that" (6) in the second). The note of restlessness which the dreamer feels is well conveyed through Chaucer's careful use of rhythm and syntax. For example, in lines 2-3 the syntax carries on without a pause from one line to the next, where there is sudden junction before the emphatic adverbial phrase "wel nygh noght" (this phrase conceivably has three stresses in reading). Similarly in lines 6-7 the second clause of the compound sentence beginning "I have so many / an ydel thoght" runs over from the end of the line and stops briefly in the middle of the next line before concluding with the explanatory phrase "how hyt cometh or gooth". The combination of relatively simple syntax with emphatic rhythms helps convey the dreamer's determination to understand his predicament. There is a feeling almost of desperation in these and succeeding lines which is reinforced by the vocabulary; the dreamer uses many words and phrases to suggest the extreme nature of the situation: "so many", "purely", "noo thinge" (repeated in line 8). It is difficult to appreciate properly the mood in which the poem opens if one reads the lines metrically. When the stresses are placed evenly so as to make regular iambic feet and not rhetorically on important words and syllables the verse is flat and unexpressive, and the dramatic pauses are obscured. The dreamer admits that he has "grete

wonder" concerning his present state, and it is clear that Chaucer took care to make the verse reflect this wonderment in reading.

A closer look at the rhythm and syntax of lines 28-40 reveals the dreamer's confused state of mind even more clearly. Having said that he cannot sleep and that this has caused him much discomfort he then tries to account for his illness:

Suche fantasies / ben in myn hede  
 So I not what / is best too doo  
 But men myght axe me / why soo  
 I may not sleepe, and what me is  
 But natheles, whoe aske this  
 Leseth his asking trewly  
 My seluen can not tell why  
 The southe, but trewly as I gesse  
 I hold it be a sicknes  
 That I haue suffred this eight yeere  
 And yet my boote is neuer the nere  
 For there is phisicien but one  
 That may me heale, but that is done

B.D. 28-40

As in the passage discussed above there are several instances of syntactic carry-over between lines, yet the verse does not give the same feeling of emphasis as the beginning.

The clause "My seluen can not tell why The southe" (34-5), for example, runs from one line to the next without a pause and then stops briefly after the first beat of line 35. But instead of amplifying in the second half of the line what he has just said, as was done in the opening of the poem, the dreamer shrugs off the question of what causes his sickness: "but trewly as I gesse". Again, in lines 39-40 he comes close to giving an answer, but after the syntactic

carry-over leading to medial juncture he refuses to go any further and says simply, "but that is done". The dreamer knows that something is wrong with him and can describe his ailment vigorously and emphatically -- note, for example, the repetition of "slepe" in lines 21 and 23, the second time in a position requiring major emphasis -- but beyond that he is at something of a loss. The tone of lines 28-40 is different from that of preceding lines: the dreamer is less confident and assertive, veering suddenly away from his problem after having led up to an answer. This is true of the poem as a whole; the reader or listener is constantly being given hints as to the dreamer's predicament but the cause and resolution of it remain a matter for speculation. A further indication that the dreamer is now even less sure of himself is his use of conjunctions to begin the majority of clauses in this section: "but nathelēs" (32), "but trewly" (35), "And yet my boote" (38), "but that is done" (40). He qualifies nearly every statement in this way, giving the impression of being confused and rambling.

As the syntax reveals, however, he is more confident when, after having read the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, he at last falls asleep and dreams. Awakening in a beautifully painted chamber he hears the sounds of a hunt in progress, joins it, and later finds himself beside a tree (the specificity of "my tree" (387) helps to evoke the atmosphere of

the dream):

I was go walked / fro my tree  
 And as I went / ther came by mee  
 A whelpe that ffavned me / as I stoode  
 That hadde y-folowed / and koude no goode  
 Hyt come and crepte / to me as lowe  
 Ryght as hyt had / me y-knowe  
 Hylde doun hys hede / and ioyned hys erys  
 And leyde al smothe / doun hys herys  
 I wolde haue kaught hyt / and anoon  
 Hyt fled / and was fro me goon  
 And I hym folwed / and hyt forthe went      B.D. 387-97

In his analysis of this passage Mr A.C. Spearing notes that the syntax is essential to our understanding of the dreamer.<sup>9</sup> The relatively short hypotactic constructions (lines 393-7 in particular) emphasise what the dreamer has to say about the little dog and his attempt to catch it. The amount of stress given words like "kaught", "fled", and "folwed" and the major pause (in most cases medial) before each "and" make the verse emphatic and choppy, suggesting the importance which the narrator places on this part of his dream. Here is an incident which is in some ways significant to him, which he can more readily comprehend than the marvellous aspects of his dream, and which he wants the audience to particularly take note of. He has tried to make contact with a creature in a dream landscape and has failed, but the whelp does lead him through this landscape to the Black Knight.

The point is, that the emphasis and lack of complexity in these lines alert the audience to a narrative detail and also suggest that the speaker in some measure com-

hends the importance of it and wishes to communicate his understanding to the audience. One might contrast the effect of comprehension gained here with the seeming lack of comprehension, or confusion, implicit in the syntax of lines 28ff. ("Suche fantasies / ben in myn hede. . . .") Chaucer undoubtedly did want the audience to have in mind a fairly clear picture of what the dreamer was actually doing in the dream landscape, but more important, he wished to exploit the relationship between performer and audience by constantly urging them to question and interpret the narrator's responses. Can we not imagine the audience asking themselves questions like "How much does this fellow really understand?"? To answer this question one must look closely at the verse to see if there is any correspondence between syntactic pattern and dramatic purpose.

It is important to examine the relationship between rhythm and syntax in the speeches of the Black Knight. Like the dreamer, the Black Knight changes significantly throughout the poem; neither character is static. Having met the knight, which the little dog has led him to, the dreamer decides to question him indirectly ("To loke wher I myght oughte Haue more knowyng / of hys thoughte" (537-8) in order to find out what is troubling him. The knight explains that he is extremely sorrowful and that nobody can properly appreciate or understand his predicament, "For y am sorwe /

and sorwe ys y" (597). Such a statement is rhetorically suspect; in this and following lines the Black Knight's grief seems almost a pose:

My sorowe ys turned / to pleynyng  
 And al my lawghte / to wepynge  
 My glade thoghtys / to hevynesse  
 In travayle / ys myn ydelnesse  
 And eke my reste / my wele is woo  
 My goode ys harme / and euer moo  
 In wrathe ys turned / my pleyng  
 And my delyte / in-to sorwynge  
 Myn hele ys turned / in-to sekeenesse  
 In drede ys al / my sykernessee  
 To derke ys turned / al my lyghte  
 My wytte ys foly / my day ys nyghte  
 My love y hate / my slepe wakynge  
 My merthe and meles / ys fastynge  
 My countenaunce / ys nycete  
 And al abawed / where so I be  
 My pees / in pledynge and in werre  
 Allas how myght I / fare werre

B.D. 599-616

The easy antitheses which the Black Knight indulges in are reinforced by a gradually predictable rhythmic pattern. Each line is syntactically and rhythmically independent, apart from a few cases of enjambment: "In travayle / ys myn ydelnesse And eke my reste/" (602-3). The majority of lines have medial and terminal pauses, making the balanced tetrameters obvious:

And eke myreste / my wele is woo	603
My goode ys harme / and euer moo	604
In drede ys al / my sykernessee	608

The effect is that of a man who has thought long and deeply about the cause of his sorrow, but who is so obsessed by it that he resorts to a formulaic style in his explanation.

Read rhythmically the lines are expressive; Chaucer no doubt wanted the audience to appreciate the rhetoric and at the same time to evaluate this character by listening closely to the speaker's voice. It is difficult to know just how Chaucer would have read these lines, though reading them now one can be fairly sure that they were written with a particular voice in mind. A scrutiny of the rhythm and syntax makes it easier to appreciate the sort of recitation which Chaucer might have given the verse. The Black Knight's attitude, though courteous, has an element of superiority; he is too sure of himself.

The dreamer's seemingly naïve questions to the Black Knight have a beneficial effect. The knight is gradually drawn out of his complacency by remembering the cause of his sorrow; prompted by the dreamer, he tells how as a youth he devoted himself to love:

Syr quod he / sith firste I kouthe  
 Haue any maner wytte / fro youthe  
 Or kyndely / vnderstondyng  
 To comprehend / in any thynge  
 What love was / in myn ovne wytte  
 Dredeles / I haue ever yitte  
 Be tributarye / and yive rente  
 To love hooly / with goode entente  
 And throgh plesaunce / become his thralle  
 With good wille / body hert and alle  
 Al this I putte / in his servage  
 As to my lorde / and did homage  
 And ful devoutely / I prayed hym to  
 he shulde besette / myn hert so  
 That hyt plesance / to hym were  
 And worshippe / to my lady dere

This passage consists of two quite long periods, the first extending over ten lines. The syntactic complexity here is in direct contrast with the simplicity of the Black Knight's earlier complaint (lines 599-616); he has progressed from a rather showy rhetoric to a more sincere explanation of his grief. The verse in this passage flows more freely and shows that the knight is making an honest attempt to communicate with the dreamer, who has shown him sympathy in a quiet way. The rhythms of lines 759-63, which are very close to prose, establish a conversational tone; the syntax is not wrenched to fit the exigencies of either metre or rhyme. The verse moves smoothly and directly to the emphatic word "Dredeles" in line 764, after which one is justified in making a major pause because of the manuscript punctuation and the number of contiguous weak stresses. This interjection provides the Black Knight with a breathing-space before continuing the period in the lines that follow. The rhythm and syntax of this passage are much closer to a natural style of speech than were his previous utterances (lines 602-4, for example). The lines are suited to a very personal and not rhetorical manner of delivery. One can imagine Chaucer, posing here as the Black Knight, sincerely trying to convince the dreamer of his devotion to love. The contiguous stresses in the following phrases reveal the Black Knight's earnest desire to explain himself; this is the sort

of emphasis a man uses when he wishes to make himself easily understood: "yive rente" (765), "love hooly" (766), "good  
ville" (768).

The relationship between rhythm and syntax, then, helps us to understand better the attitudes of characters within the poem. Each has a distinctive voice, and we must do our best to hear it if we are to read Chaucer's poetry in the way he meant it to be delivered. Of course, I cannot argue that my reading of passages from The Book of the Duchess is actually what Chaucer had in mind when he wrote and recited his verse to court assemblies. We can never be sure of such things as pitch and intonation. But the fact that the verse supports these readings at least tells us that Chaucer was no doubt conscious of dramatic effects and utilised them in his own recitations. In this respect it is useful to compare Chaucer's treatment of the story of Ceyx and Alcyone with that of his friend and poet, John Gower, who includes it in Book IV of Confessio Amantis.

Gower devotes sixteen lines of verse to Alcyone's reaction to her husband's disappearance while on a sea voyage:

Bot whan the monthes were ago,  
The whiche he sette of his comynge,  
And that sche herde no tydinge,  
Ther was no care for to seche:  
Whereof the goddes to beseche  
Tho sche began in many wise,  
And to Iuno hire sacrificise  
Above all othre most sche dede,

And for hir lord sche hath so bede  
 To wite and knowe hou that he ferde,  
 That Juno the goddesse hire herde,  
 Anon and upon this matiere  
 Sche bad Yris hir messagere  
 To Slepes hous that sc he schal wende,  
 And bidde him that he make an ende,  
 Be swenvene and schewen al the cas  
 Unto this ladi, hou it was.<sup>10</sup>

The queen's plight is disposed of in a workmanlike manner; Gower gives only the essential facts of the narrative -- primarily that of Alcyone's turning to her goddess, Juno, for help -- and seems more interested in getting quickly to a description of Morpheus' cave (lines 65ff.).

Chaucer, however, has included this story in his poem for a specific purpose: Alcyone's longing for her lost husband is relevant to our understanding of the dreamer and the Black Knight, both suffering from losses of their own. His handling of Alcyone's immediate reaction is about twice the length of Gower's:

Now for to speake of Alcyone his wife  
 This Lady that was left at home  
 Hath wonder, that the king ne come  
 Home, for it was a long terme  
 Anone her herte began to yerne  
 And for that her thought euermo  
 It was not wele, her thought soe  
 She longed soe after the king  
 That certes it were a pitous thing  
 To tell her hartely sorowfull life  
 That she had, this noble wife  
 For him alas, she loued alderbeste  
 Anone she sent bothe este and weste

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<sup>10</sup> Sisam, ed., Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose, pp. 132-3, ll. 34-50. All further references to Gower's "Ceix and Alceone" are to this edition.

To seke him, but they founde nought  
 Alas (quoth shee) that I was wrought  
 And where my lord my loue be deed?  
 Certes I will neuer eate breed  
 I make a uowe to my god here  
 But I mowe of my Lord here.  
 Soche sorowe this Lady to her toke  
 That trewly I which made this booke  
 Had such pittee / and suche rowthe  
 To rede hir sorwe / that by my trowthe  
 I ferde the worse / al the morwe  
 And aftir to thenken / on hir sorwe  
 So whan this lady / koude here noo worde  
 That no many nyght / fynde hir lorde  
 Ful ofte she swovned / and sayed alas  
 For sorwe / ful nygh woode she was  
 Ne she koude / no rede but oon  
 But dovne on knees / she sate anoon  
 And wepte / that pittee was to here

B.D. 76-107

It is not only in the respective number of lines accorded this part of the story that the two poets differ, but also in their stylistic treatment of it.

Gower's verse is, in this passage at least, rather perfunctory compared with that of Chaucer. Most of the lines are end-stopped, without phrasal balance, and in a quite regular metre:

^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /  
 Bot whan the monthes were ago,  
 ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /  
 The whiche he sette of his comynge,  
 ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /  
 And that sche herde no tydinge,  
 ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / (^)  
 Ther was no care for to seche:

34-7

I have counted the final -e as a syllable here because there seems no point in not doing so. It is clear that Gower is aiming at some measure of metrical regularity; reading the verse rhythmically does not make much improve-

ment (as it does in Chaucer) because the syntax is largely confined to the single line. In Chaucer's version, however, rhythm and syntax work together in verse that gives the oral reader greater scope for dramatic treatment. The syntax of, for example, the opening lines of this section of The Book of the Duchess is independent of the individual line:

Now for to speake of Alcyone his wife  
 This Lady that was left at home  
 Hath wonder, that the king ne come  
 Home, for it was a long terme

B.D. 76-9

Unlike Gower, Chaucer makes his verse personal by using rhythms which allow stresses on the important words and syllables and syntax which is not bound by metre. What syntactic continuity there is in Gower is provided chiefly by the use of conjunctions:

And to Iuno hire sacrifice  
 Above alle othre most sche dede,  
And for hir lord sche hath so bede

40-2

The result is in many respects verse that is stiff and unexpressive, and that offers little to the oral reader in the way of dramatic effects. In Chaucer, the verse is much closer to the rhythms of ordinary speech. The lines of the following excerpt are not end-stopped like those of Gower:

She longed soe after the king  
 That certes it were a pitous thing  
 To tell her hartely sorowfull life  
 That she had, this noble wife

B.D. 83-6

Here the syntactic carry-over and dramatic pauses (after "had" (86), for example) are used with great effectiveness; apart from the dreamer's own statement that he sympathises with Alcyone's plight, the verse itself shows him to be vitally interested in the events he is narrating. It is far easier to believe in Chaucer's lines as the language spoken by living men than in Gower's.

An understanding of the relationship between rhythm and syntax helps us to appreciate the dramatic qualities of Chaucer's verse. Even if, with Professor Baum,<sup>11</sup> we treat all apparent nuances of rhythm as matters of subjective modern interpretation, it is clear that Chaucer carefully distinguished the speaking voices of his characters. It is always Chaucer speaking through these characters, so that one is justified in referring to a distinctive voice in The Book of the Duchess which is recognisably different from that of Langland or Gower, for example. The imposition of a rigid metre on the verse makes it difficult to hear this "living voice" because it obscures the relationship between syntactic variety and rhythmic emphasis.

\* \* \*

The purpose of this thesis has been to show that the verse of The Book of the Duchess demands some sort of dramatic recitation. When we attempt to actually hear

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11 Baum, Chaucer's Verse, p. 52.

Chaucer through words on the printed page we shall know better how to interpret and evaluate his poetry. He left the sounding of final -e open, wrote rhythmical rather than metrical lines, and was able to use syntactic variety to give his characters (including his persona as the naïve dreamer) recognisably different and personal voices. It is difficult to appreciate his careful use of rhythm and syntax and their relationship to dramatic purpose in the modern printed editions, which have been edited according to theories of prosody of a much later age and which have ignored the original punctuation. Only when we get as close as possible to the original text can we hear the living voice of the poet himself and properly understand what he has to say to us.

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