Robert P. Stockwell & Donka Minkova (Los Angeles)
The partial-contact origins of English pentameter verse:
The Anglicization of an Italian model

1. Introduction

By “partial contact origins” we do not mean quite the same as “partial learning” or “imperfect acquisition” as in almost all language learning at any significant remove from the cradle. By “partial contact origins” we intend to say that the donor system was understood pretty well, but constituents of the donor system, even though understood, failed to be embraced, consciously and by choice of the borrower. As far as we know, there is no established term in the literature for this sense that we intend our phrase to convey. Pieces of the system, we will claim, were borrowed and pieces were left out, but there is every reason to believe they were not left out through ignorance, which is what usually happens in borrowing. There were substantial differences between the prosodic systems of English and the Romance languages, differences of a type that made Chaucer’s new focus on duple rhythm possible. Romance is overwhelmingly polysyllabic, while English, even in Chaucer’s time, had a much higher proportion of actual or potential monosyllables. Iambic verse was in a sense “easier” in English because only the stressed syllables of polysyllables are metrically fixed: Monosyllables go along in whichever way is required by convenient fit to the metrical template.

The issue of Chaucer’s prosodic originality and the metrical components of his pentameter have received considerable attention lately; the two studies that approach most closely our target are by Duffell (1996) and Youmans (1996). Duffell (1996: 218) pointed out that when Chaucer

1 We would like to thank our LACHE hosts, the editors of this volume, for organising the conference for which this paper was prepared. For useful questions and comments we are grateful to David Burnley, Hans-Jürgen Diller, Udo Fries, Manfred Markus. For especially careful and critical readings, we are much in debt to Steve Barney and Christopher McCully, though we absolve them of responsibility for the content, in particular the scansion, many of which they may disagree with. We gratefully acknowledge travel support from the UCLA Academic Senate Research Committee.

We won’t repeat the complicated publication history of this volume; we want to point out, however, that the intervening five years of Chaucerian verse studies, ours and other people’s, have forced substantial revisions of the original contribution, shifting the focus away from “partial-contact” and “origins” towards the linguistic components of English which enabled the transfer and Anglicization of the Continental model. The new focus accounts for our subtitle.
created iambic pentameter in English, he made one major innovative artistic cut against the grain of the contact system from which he derived it, namely to confine himself mostly to duple rhythm at the cost of triple rhythm. Dealing only with the mature and sophisticated pentameter lines of Chaucer’s latest works, the *Troilus* (1382-1385), and the *Canterbury Tales* (1388-1400), we draw our historical background – the Romance progenitors – and therefore part of the “contact origins”, from Duffell (1991, 1996, n.d.). For the English ingredients of the new entity, however, we differ both from Duffell and from Youmans. Youmans demonstrates convincingly that the principles of gradient metricality defined for Shakespeare’s and Milton’s verse are applicable to Chaucer’s pentameter, and that in spite of the predominance of alternating stress patterns in Chaucer, a foot-based account of his meter covers more adequately the syntactic and stylistic variations of his pentameter line. Our focus is on elucidating the difference between metrical and rhythmic units in Chaucer and on the linguistic components of rhythmic variability. While Youmans’s conclusions are fully compatible with our principles, his observations on scansion intersect ours only marginally. We differ from Duffell in that he does not discriminate between the notions of “triple rhythm” and “triplets” (= trisyllabic feet). He does not discuss the latter, only the former. We will argue that they are distinct notions, and we will claim that the Chaucerian metrists who allow occasional trisyllabic feet are mistaken – most of the famous metrists from Skeat (1894) and ten Brink (1885 [1901]) to Schipper (1895), F.N. Robinson (1933 [1957]), Baum (1961), Gaylord (1976), and Barney (1993), but not including Smithers (1983), Bischoff (1897/1898), and Wild (1915), with whom we are in agreement.2 The establishment position – but incorrect, in our opinion – is succinctly stated by F.N. Robinson (1933: xxxii) thus:

> Like most English poets, [Chaucer] not infrequently has an extra light syllable in a line (a trisyllabic foot in place of the regular iambus), though in such cases it is often impossible to determine whether to resort to apocopation. The extra syllable seems to have been most frequent in the caesural pause.

And Skeat (1894: lxxxviii):

---

2 Youmans (1996: 186-187) dismisses the possibility of genuine anapestic foot substitutions within the iambic pentameter line because “it fails to account for the metrical constraints on extra syllables in these lines”; instead, he refers to the possibility of a “split position” analysis of sequences such as *Of a* in *GP* 364: *Of a solemype and a greet fraternyte*

He does not comment on either the frequency of such “split” positions, nor on constraints on them in Chaucer.
[H]e freely accepted the principles of adding a syllable at the end of the line [on this there is no question, and everyone agrees – RS and DM] and at the end of the half-line. He also allowed himself to accept the principle of dropping the first syllable of the line.

Placement of an extra syllable just before the caesura is known as an “epic caesura” in the literature on the Romance progenitors of Chaucer. We find that in Chaucer’s verse the examples are virtually all in the form of a final unstressed vowel followed by an initial unstressed vowel after the caesura, and that this fact strongly suggests that Chaucer actually avoided the epic caesura in favour of some sort of vowel merger to maintain the ten-syllable count. Even lines that seem to contain an epic caesura in some manuscripts, like this one from Hengwrt,

(a) We moste endure it; this is the short and playn. 

(KT 1091, Hengwrt)

are commonly non-epic ordinary caesuras in other good manuscripts:

(b) We moste endure, this is the short and playn. 

(KT 1091, Ellesmere)

In order to appreciate properly what Chaucer was doing in his borrowing and restructuring of the Romance decasyllabic model, it is absolutely crucial to discriminate between rhythmic triples and metrical triplets. Our reasons for viewing this distinction as being of central importance will gradually emerge: We emphasise the matter now in order to shape the forest which is easily obscured by underbrush.

We will discuss the pedigree of three separate components of Chaucer’s iambic pentameter: (a) number of syllables, (b) caesuras and ictus, and (c) rhythmic grouping within the line – duple or triple or mixed. Terminologically, we shall distinguish between “meter” (by which we mean the abstract conceptual pattern of measured repetition of some phonological unit – number of syllables and relative prominence, or both) and “rhythm”, by which we mean the actual periodicity and relative strength of beats that occur in a particular instantiation of a metrical pattern, i.e. a line of verse in a natural and unforced rendition. Meter is a design which exists independently of the properties of the linguistic material fitted into it, while rhythm is derived from the lexical and morphosyntactic properties of that linguistic material.
2. The basic template: Syllabic count

Before Chaucer, there was no hendecasyllabic verse in English. There was proper syllabic verse, but it was predominantly octosyllabic, i.e. verse written in common time, everything divisible by two. One point in which Chaucer is completely indebted to the Continental tradition is the syllabic count in his iambic pentameter: The syllable count must have been borrowed, because it did exist in France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, and it did not exist in England prior to Chaucer. (1) represents the basic template of the French décasyllabe, the Portuguese decasílabo, the Italian endecasillabo and the Spanish endecasílabo, with the positions that count, counted:

\[(1) \quad \bullet \ \bullet \ \bullet \ 1 (\ast) \ -- \ \bullet \ \bullet \ \bullet \ \bullet \ \bullet \ 1 (\ast) (\ast)\]

\[1 \ 2 \ 3 \ 4 \quad 5 \ 6 \ 7 \ 8 \ 9 \ 10\]

Parenthesised syllables at the caesura and the line-end are extrametrical. French metrists indicate the presence or absence of the extrametrical (unstressed) syllables by distinguishing M(asculine) and F(eminine) verses. The template (1) is thus 4M/F + 6M/F. Since the M/F distinction is always extrametrical, the template may be called the 4+6 template of the decasyllabic line, or simply the X(I). Except for caesural placement, the template is fundamentally the same, no matter the language.

3. Caesura and ictus in earlier verse: French vs. Italian

It has been persuasively argued in Duffell (n.d.) that the model that led to Chaucer’s innovation – the pure five-beat iambic line – was Boccaccio’s

---

3 Even Orm’s septenarius was common time, four feet + three feet + one foot, where the final foot was always a rest foot.

4 This label, which is Duffell’s, has certain advantages and may well become standard. It captures the central fact that the line must have exactly ten syllables, with a possible eleventh syllable, always weak, at the right edge; it ignores the position of the caesura, which became variable in Italian though not in French; and it ignores the extra syllable that can appear in Romance at the caesural juncture. The feminine caesura (the “epic caesura”) does not appear in Chaucer, if – as we believe – Bischoff (1897/1898) was right; Smithers (1983) has correctly pointed out that Baum (1961: 21, footnote) erred in reading Bischoff as having asserted “that Caucer admitted no trisyllabic feet except at the so-called caesura”; scanned in accord with the X(I) template – and we agree – all trisyllabic feet disappear by virtue of the standard rules of elision, apocope, syncope, and synizesis (two vowels coalescing without forming a pre-existing diphthong). But triple rhythm does not disappear, because that depends on so-called “inversions”, as we shall see in section 8.
verse and not the French vers de dix. Duffell’s argument is based primarily on freedom of caesural placement. He demonstrates that Chaucer “employs all Boccaccio’s variants [of caesural placement], and his only debt specifically to France seems to be a few epic caesurae, borrowed from an earlier age. He also borrowed the Italians’ favourite rhythm, because French lines have no rhythm within the line.”

In the early French syllabic template, beginning with the Vie de Saint Alexis (shortly after 1020), only two syllables are ictic, bearing prosodic prominence by virtue of the verse template itself, the first one originally in position 4. The second ictic position was always in position 10. If medieval Romance verse is read with a modern French accent, these are the phrasal stress positions and the syntax must correlate accordingly. In hendecasyllabic verse all the other positions were, in principle, variably stressed, i.e. could be filled by weak or by strong syllables. Note well: It was not required, as part of the template, that these syllables alternate regularly between weak and strong. No one can be sure just when word stress was lost in French, but we are not satisfied that “word stress was much stronger in Old French than it is in the modern language” (Duffell 1991: 252). For this kind of verse to take root, lexical stress must have been ignored because it was very weak, or it was non-existent as in Modern French. In the early 4+6 template, among the non-ictic syllables after the caesura position 7 was commonly strong, i.e. coincided with a second phrasal stress. The most frequent original rhythm, therefore, was

(2) de-de-de-DUM -- de-de-DUM de-de-DUM

Perhaps the most important detail to note about (2) is the presence of triple rhythmic groups after the caesura. This is extremely rare in Chaucer⁵, though it occurs:

(3) 0 1 0 1 -- 0 0 1 0 0 1

*And lif is lost -- but ye wol on me rewe*   (TC 1.462)⁶

---

⁵ Most potential examples, like this one, depend on the assumption that some weak monosyllables are weaker than others, discussed below under principle (e.iii.).

To avoid editorial interference we have taken all our Canterbury Tales examples from the Hengwrt manuscript (Ruggiers (ed.) 1979), except that we have replaced the letter thorn with <th>. (Of course, the Hengwrt scribe may have favored metrical regularities. If that be so, at least we did not select it for that reason; it is generally regarded as the best text. See Baker’s defense of this view in Ruggiers ((ed.) 1979: xvii-xviii).) For Troilus and Criseyde, we have relied on the Riverside (Benson (ed.) 1983).
4. Notation of meter and rhythm

Our notation, in particular the bracketing that we have indicated by the single hyphens in the row above the words, is intended to represent the rhythm of the line. The meter, on the other hand, is always the same, namely

\[(0) 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 (0)\]

This is the metrical template. Since it is always the same we do not need to represent it overtly. We indicate the caesura with a double hyphen [—], writing it within the line of verse itself and often in the rhythmical notation, especially where it is crucial to the reading. The dash has a meaning in ordinary orthography which exactly fits the notion “caesura” and we therefore prefer it to arbitrary symbols like [ ] or [ ] which do not have a common language interpretation. We follow Duffell in using the notation [1] for [strong] and [0] for [weak]. Thus [1 0] notation is transparently [STRONG weak]. By other scholars it has been written [S w], [s w], [s x], [/ x], [/ k], [x .], and no doubt still others. These can be used to notate feet: [1 0] = trochee, [0 1] = iamb, [0 0 1] = anapaest, [1 0 0] = dactyl, but whether [0 0 1] actually notates an anapaest (for example) in a particular instance depends on the metrical environment in which it is embedded. That is to say, there is a difference between an actual anapaestic foot, embedded in otherwise anapaestic lines, and the perceptual effect of a triplet, which would echo a single anapaestic foot in a non-anapaestic line. The effect may be achieved, for example, by trochaic reversal in the first foot: [0 1] + [0 1] may become [1 0] + [0 1], which may create an anapaestic rhythmic effect as though it were bracketed [1] + [0 0 1]. But an actual anapaestic foot, replacing an iamb in iambic pentameter, would necessarily move the final ictus to position 11, which does not happen in

---

6 This scansion is also Guthrie’s (1988: 41), we infer (he does not actually scan it, but his discussion leaves no doubt). The only plausible alternative scansion strikes us as excessively forced:

\[0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1\]

*And lif is lost but ye wol on me rewe* (TC 1.462)

By “forced” we mean: if we promote ye to ictus, then we also have to promote on. Thus we will have favored, for promotion, a pronoun and a preposition. To us it seems better to favor, in this string of three weakish syllables, the verb, hence our scansion. We discuss below this matter of what to do with three weak syllables in a row. A scansion with a single triple, contrastive emphasis on ye and me:

\[0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1\]

*And lif is lost but ye wol on me rewe* (TC 1.462)

is marginally possible, though fourth-foot trochaic reversal is highly suspect, and we see no good reason to create stress clashes where not strongly required by the morphology and syntax.
Chaucer’s verse (we deal, below, with examples that have been claimed to have this property).

5. The insular components of the Continental model

We now turn to some specifically English elements in the tradition which originated with Chaucer. The home-grown elements of the template in (1) are, we claim, indispensable ingredients of the previously unattested iambic pentameter form. The ingredients are here expressed in terms of principles of line organisation and scansion; some of the principles listed below may be shared by other historical metrists, others not, hence the use of the first person pronoun.

(a) If there are 10 or 11 syllables, we take the tenth as always ictic, no exceptions.7

(b) We do not allow more than 11 syllables and the eleventh must be weak. If there appear to be more than this number in the line, we omit from scansion excess weak syllables in accord with standard assumptions about elision, syncopation, apocope of line-internal -’e’s, and synizesis.

Our practice is in substantial accord with that of Kökeritz in scanning Shakespeare, except that provable instances of trisyllabic feet are much more frequent in Shakespeare: “Only when a line cannot be made to scan by the application of all known devices of word reduction are we entitled to consider the possibility of trisyllabic substitution” (Kökeritz 1961 [1969]: 224). We believe the meter respects most organic final -’e’s, as nicely

7 The principle of an inviolable tenth syllable ictic realisation makes this position unique in the verse line in that it allows violations of the lexical stress of the word which appears in that position. The following lines from The Wife of Bath’s Prologue illustrate the point:

17: Thou hast yhad fyve hóusbondes, – quod he,
18: – And that ilke man that now hath thee
19: Is noght thyn hóusbonde, – thus seyde he certeyn.
20: What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;
29: That gentil text kan I wel understonde.
30: Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbónde

Such violations of the linguistic input in favor of the metrical template are not part of the borrowed model; they are a consequence of a well-understood principle of rhyming on stressed syllables, followed loyally by English versifiers from the time of the earliest specimens of rhymed verse.

8 In the late plays especially, where there are lines like this from Antony and Cleopatra, cited by Kökeritz: “Like to a Vagabond Flagge upon the Streame” (1961: footnote 27). As Smithers (1983: 219) says, “[o]ne reason for doubting in practice that the author [Chaucer] used these two rhythmic patterns [either one, or two, successive weak syllables – RS and DM] is the fact that there are relatively so few secure examples of them.”
summarized, for example, in Barney (1993: 94-104), e.g. in infinitives, past participles, datives, monosyllabic weak adjectives; but occasional metrical deletion of organic –e’s is necessary.9

c) If there appear to be only nine syllables, we try to find an appropriately realisable vowel or other syllabic unit to make a tenth. We of course allow headless lines, which are nine-syllable lines that conform to the decasyllabic template except that an initial weak syllable is missing. Headless lines must start with an unarguably strong syllable. So-called “Lydgatian lines” also have only nine syllables, but they start with an unarguably weak syllable, they have a stress clash usually across the caesura, and they are really bad lines. We would like to believe that Chaucer did not write them. This line from the Troilus (I.496) is scanned as indicated by Barney (1993: 109):

(4) 0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1 - 1 0 - 1 (0)

Ne semed it -- that she of hym roughte

We would force the stress clash to straddle the caesura, but the resulting scansion is only slightly better:

(5) 0 1 - 0 1 - 1 0 - 1 0 - 1 (0)

The fact is that Lydgatian lines are almost always emended (see Barney 1993: 111), a practice with which we are in full agreement. If not emended, they certainly must be discounted for the purpose of describing Chaucer’s metrical system.10

d) We let the strong syllables fall where they may, not demoting in violation of the regular stress-assignment rules of Middle English, except that more than a total of five strong syllables are never allowed (four indeed are possible, just as in the Shakespearean lines cited above). If

---

9 Elision of the infinitival final -e in hiatus is very common (e.g. General Prologue 34, 94, 95, 96, 106, 144 et passim), which suggests that the -n-less infinitive does not behave differently from other parts of speech. Barber — Barber (1991: 77) report that in the 382 infinitives they examined in non-elision environment, 40% lose their -e, while 60% keep it. By comparison, weak monosyllabic adjectives (445 examined) keep -e 84% of the time, 5% are ambiguous, and most of the 11% that lose the -e precede a noun that is not stressed on the initial syllable by virtue of its structure or position in the X(I), or both, e.g. GP 316 “For his science and for his heigh renoun”.

10 There is a long tradition of suspicion concerning the authenticity of Lydgatian lines, most colorfully expressed by Saintsbury (1923: 175, note): “I am perfectly certain that Chaucer’s prosodic wit was never so thin, and his ear never so thick, as to write [My take is doon for my wit is thine MT 438] … [which is] easily mended with syllables that copyists were quite likely to slip, especially when Lydgate himself had misled them”.
appearances seem to suggest there might be more than five, something has to be demoted.

(e) We use the following three principles for the resolution of metrical ambiguity (i.e. instances where a scansion that violates the metrical template might be preferred):

(e.i) Lexical stress in polysyllables, especially disyllables, is inviolable. Thus words like again, before, between, among, compel, rely can only be scanned [0 1], and words like battle, fancy, roses, angel can only be scanned [1 0]. Where lexical stress is certain, it is never to be demoted in scansion and cannot be shifted for metrical convenience (but see (f) below for words that might have had variable stress, where therefore lexical stress is not certain).

(e.ii) Equally, a lexically weak stress cannot be promoted for metrical reasons except in rhyme position: This is the weak counterpart of (e.i). Together, principles (e.i) and (e.ii) are functions of the fact that stress in polysyllables is, in general, lexically fixed – almost totally, in native words, though somewhat more variable in recent French borrowings, in Chaucer’s time.

(e.iii) When no lexical stress is available to force the issue, there is always a basis for disagreement, and here English differs greatly from the Romance languages, where polysyllabic stress assignment, and where ictus is usually determined by that fact (except, of course, in French after lexical stress was lost). Our view about scanning a language with many monosyllables – Chaucer’s as well as Modern English – is that the best scansion is the one which assigns low prominence to the inherently weakest syllables, and promotes only those syllables to high prominence which are morphologically more salient. This is not easy to determine and may vary from case to case, but generally, we would rank function words lowest, with simple determiners (a, the) at the very bottom, monosyllabic prepositions and pronouns next, light auxiliaries (be, wol) next, monosyllabic conjunctions next (and, or), complementisers next (for in for to), and above that it doesn’t seem to matter: heavy conjunctions, verbs, adjectives, nouns.

(f) Central to our practice in scanning polysyllabic words, including French loans, we assume that the stress accords with that of Modern English, wherever that reading is possible metrically. There is a good argument to be made that by the second half of the fourteenth century disyllabic Romance nouns and most adjectives were stressed initially. This is especially true for nouns with a heavy first syllable: auctor, fortune, garden, languour, mantel, martir(e), servise. By that time the matching of syllable

\[11\] The arguments for this position are presented in Minkova (in press).
weight with stress in the native vocabulary was complete through vowel lengthening in open stressed syllables. Through early loss of final vowels in Anglo-Norman, as in porpos(e) ‘purpose’, the pattern of initial stress in disyllabic words was reinforced in the borrowed vocabulary. Some independent evidence is provided by sound change: In order to account for the semantic split later, we have to assume pronunciations of both person and parson, following the native pattern of darling, harbour, harvest. This change occurs only in stressed syllables where the -r- is tautosyllabic. So unless there is some overwhelming evidence to the contrary, or when there is indisputably trisyllabic realisation in rhyme, we count monomorphemic words of Romance origin in the same way we count native vocabulary. The following line from The Miller’s Tale is a case in point:

(6) 1 - 0 0 1 -- 0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1 (0)
Ialous he was, -- and heeld hire narwe in Cage (MT 3224)

One can insist on the (certainly possible) reading without the initial triple (i.e., without the initial trochaic inversion), but since this inversion, and this pronunciation, were both surely possible in Chaucer’s time, why force this strict iambic reading:

(7) 0 1 - 0 1 -- 0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1
Ialous he was, -- and heeld hire narwe in Cage (MT 3224)

Clearer still, if one is worried about the potential stress ambiguity of Ialous, are instances involving line-initial inversion of non-Romance single-root disyllables (the examples below are from Troilus and Criseyde):

(8) Liggyng abedde, and make hem for to grone; (Tr. I.915)
(9) Wolden as now do this honour to me, (Tr. II.1432)
(10) Stynteth right here, and softely yow pleye. (Tr. II.1729)
(11) After thiself next heried be she - (Tr. III.1256)

Some headless lines, which always start trochaic, remain trochaic throughout. Such lines are arguably best analysed as having a silent initial weak syllable.

(12) (0) 1 - 0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1 - 0 1 (0)
Heren noyse of reynes nor of thonder? (Tr. III.662)
(g) We disallow, both metrically and rhythmically, sequences of three fully unstressed syllables anywhere in the line. We would have to, and do, scan lines such as:

(13) For all the tresour in the town of Troie
     I nolde setten at his sorwe a myte
     But this thyng stant al in another kynde
     For I wol speke, or ellis go my wey.

as containing only duples.12

(h) To repeat a point which may already have been made sufficiently, we disallow all “trisyllabic” feet, even under the heading “slurring” (Verschleifung), whereby the final [1] would be forced into position 11. The term has been used ambiguously either (1) to mean “reduction to nonsyllabic status” (Bischoff 1898: II.368, quoted in Smithers 1983: 230), which is fine by us: It means “elision” or “synizesis” under that reading; or (2) as Baum, Schipper and Skeat and most other metrists use it, to mean having full syllabic status, just, as it were, danced over lightly, a “compromise which hurries over one syllable” (Saintsbury 1923: 172).13 This latter notion we view as psychologically unsound: If it is a syllable it has syllabic status. So while we do not object to the term “slur”, a slur is always but one syllable, not two.

It should be clear that the bracketing we place above the line (indicated by hyphens) does not refer either to metrical template bracketing or to syntactic phrasing; it represents rhythmic grouping. Rhythmically, we believe, weak syllables are always proclitic to a strong syllable (barring a major caesura, which is syntactically determined). This is totally obvious in a phrase like, say, bread on his plate; we believe it is perceptually also true of a phrase like working the crowd: They are both [DUM – de de

12 Our practice in scanning Chaucer differs, therefore, from some analyses of later verse, e.g. Tarlinskaja (1992: 173) considers the line

To be the curtain of the inmost soul

from Frost, “The Fear of God” (13), as containing a mixture of disyllabic and trisyllabic feet. We would have to promote of, only a slight promotion if you will, but a reading without this promotion is in our opinion impossible, because it is neither dupe nor triple rhythm within the phrase curtain of the inmost.

0 1 0 1 0 0 0 1 0 1
To be the curtain of the inmost soul

13 Saintsbury writes that “with so excellent an English word as “slur”, which exactly expresses the English practice, I can see no excuse for Synizesis (1923: 172, note).”
DUM]. The basis for this proclitic perception of the relation between duple meter and triple rhythm is probably the fact that the verse always ends [0 1], which forces the [1] in position 8 to seek, perceptually speaking, to the left for its partner(s); and so on back to the beginning of the line. Only the first [1], therefore, is stranded without a rhythmic partner in a trochaic reversal.

In their aggregate, the principles and constraints defined in (a)-(h) give a specific shape to the Continental decasyllabic line which is known as the “iambic pentameter”. Some aspects of the borrowed model facilitated the introduction of these principles. The Italians (especially Boccaccio) had developed a unified line of ten syllables with a mobile caesura (Duffell 1991: 252). Their metrical template allows a much more flexible placement of the original two peaks, which puts in jeopardy the two-peak earlier template and paves the way for the iamb. In other words, if the first two peaks can come at positions 4, 5, 6, or 7, albeit in different lines, the model of a di- or tri-apical line (and salience of phrasal stress only) will easily be superseded by a model involving more peaks, matching not phrasal, but word stress. Gasparov (1980), quoted in Tarlinskaja (1987: 7-8), has shown that even early Italian verse has an iambic tendency, never less than 33%.14

6. On rhythmic duples and triples in the model and in English

The next question is, if the modified metrical template allows more than two ictus, and if the poet uses both word and phrasal stress to fill those ictic positions in a consistently decasyllabic verse, where do these stresses fall within the line? There were two extreme rhythmic possibilities: alternating stress as in (14)

(14)  \[0 \ 1 \ - \ 0 \ 1 \ - \ 0 \ 1 \ - \ 0 \ 1\]

which is duple time throughout; and

(15)  \[1 \ - \ 0 \ 0 \ 1 \ - \ 0 \ 0 \ 1 \ - \ 0 \ 1\]

which is triple time throughout. A decasyllabic verse completely in triple time necessarily has only four stressed positions (since triples use up nine of the ten available positions). Early in the history of the Romance decasyllable it became possible to mix duple and triple time to produce what was called a *fragmento adónico*. The most common analogue of a

14 Pure syllabicity, on the other hand is only 4% – in 12 Italian poets from Dante to D’Annunzio (Saintsbury 1923: 172, note).
rhythmically mixed line in Chaucer results from the familiar “trochaic reversal” in the first foot, which creates (rhythmically speaking) a triple. The traditional trochee + iamb analysis is given as (16), the rhythmic effect of the triple is given as (17):

(16) \[1 - 0 - 0 - 1 - 0 - 0 - 1 - 0\]

(17) \[1 - 0 - 0 - 1 - 0 - 0 - 1 - 0 - 1\]

Duffell counts a string as duple time or triple time only if either rhythm recurs at least twice and preferably three times: Thus [10101] and [1001001] are the minimal duple-defining and triple-defining sequences in his X(I) system. While we do not disagree with this as a basis for statistical generalisations, it is the matter of defining rhythmic variation and rhythmic redefinition across two languages, from Romance to English, that interests us here. The syllable-timed nature of the Romance languages will tend to blur and even conceal the effect of a single triple in the line. The reason why it is not necessary to have two consecutive occurrences of a duple or a triple to perceive and define rhythmic variation in a language like English is that English is roughly beat-isochronous: That is, strong stresses tend to be spaced equidistantly. The “speeding up” of syllable rates that goes with even a single triple among duples is rhythmically striking. Since a triple rhythm is such a distinctive rhythmic variant from duple when it occurs even once, we count any trochaic substitution as a mixture of duple and triple, while Duffell would not. We therefore cannot compare his statistical generalisations with ours, though it appears that our definition roughly doubles the number of triples.

Elaborating further on point (b) in section 5: Our “triples” (and Duffell’s) stay strictly within the X(I) syllabic count; they are to be distinguished from the “triplets” (tri-syllabic feet) commonly referred to in Chaucerian metrical studies, which editors allow – usually reluctantly and with reservations about textual corruption – as an additional weak syllable between ictus, creating a line with the fifth ictus on position 11. For example, within the context of a discussion of the syllabic count of the past participle of *come*, Barney (1993: 92-93) allows … *come that* … to be taken as an instantiation of a “triplet” in (18), arguing from the huge

---

15 Youmans (1996: 204-209) offers a convincing account of the syntactic and stylistic effects of metrically motivated inversions and concludes that though Chaucer was more sparing in their use, his verse obeys the same constraints on such inversion as can be found in Shakespeare and Milton.
number of strong past participles that clearly have -e(n) compared with those that don’t, as found in the manuscripts.

\[(18) \quad 0 \ 1 - 0 \ 1 - 0 \ 1 - 0 - 0 \ 1 - 0 \ 1 \ (0)\]

\[
\text{For sith the day is come -- that I shal dye} \quad (\text{KnT 1732})
\]

\[
1 \ 2 \ 3 \ 4 \ 5 \ 6 \ 7 \ 8 \ 9 \ 10 \ 11 \ (12)
\]

This produces a serious violation of the ten-syllable template. Indeed Barney asserts that the scansion above “may exemplify a recognised license in Chaucer’s lines, an occasional “triplet” or extra light syllable between stresses” (Barney 1993: 93). His key argument depends on the undeniable fact that past participles frequently scan with the final -e pronounced. But sometimes they don’t, as Barney recognises. For us come in the above line would have to be monosyllabic; the line cannot contain real triplets that increase the syllable count and force the final ictus to appear on position 11. That begins to happen much later in English verse (not really commonly until the nineteenth century); we believe it does not ever happen in Chaucer, properly scanned; and if it appears to be supported textually, then syncopation, elision, synizesis, or textual corruption is to be suspected.\(^16\)

Below we illustrate these concepts with examples from Shakespeare and Milton, these examples having properties which differ superficially from Romance decasyllabic verse only in that Renaissance verse does not allow extrametricality within the verse.\(^17\)

\[(19) \quad 0 \ 1 - 0 \ 1 - 1 - 0 \ 0 \ 1 - 0 \ 1 \]

\[
\text{A wretched soul, -- bruised with ad ver si ty} \quad (\text{Comedy of Errors, II.1})
\]

\[(20) \quad 1 - 0 \ 0 \ 1 - 0 \ 1 - 1 - 0 \ 0 \ 1 \]

\(^16\) We are not convinced that Chaucer’s metrical practice, abstracted away from errors in textual transmission, includes any lines that would be metrically parallel to modern examples with triplets (placing position X on the eleventh syllable) such as:

\[
0 \ 1 - 0 \ 0 \ 1 - 0 \ 0 \ 1 - 1 \ 0 \ 1
\]

\[
\text{Were really as dark as I hear sages tell ...} \quad (\text{Frost, “The Lesson of Today”, quoted in Tarlinskaja 1992: 179}). \text{Such lines contain true anapestic feet replacing iambic feet. Indeed, this particular verse is so anapestic that probably the last three syllables should be scanned [0 0 1] to make a third anapest, with “sages” demoted, which also avoids an ugly stress clash.}
\]

\(^17\) All the Italian examples are selected and scanned by Duffell. The English ones have been randomly selected by us from Shakespeare. There can certainly be some legitimate disagreements about particular scansion, but we feel confident that enough of them will withstand scrutiny to establish our main points.
Be, as thy presence is, -- gracious and kind  (Sonnet 10)

Holds in perfection -- but a little moment  (Sonnet 15)

Prouder than rustling -- in unpaid- for silk  (Cymbeline 3.3)

Brought on his way with joy; -- hee unobserv'd  
Home to his Mothers house -- private return'd  
(Paradise Regained 638-639)

Below from Boccaccio’s Filostrato, Book I, are lines 2, 4, and 6, chosen to illustrate triples:

ne lor principii -- pietosi invocare

io di Parnaso -- le Muse pregare

novellamente -- m’ha fatto mutare

Italian verses show plenty of instances of duple alternating stress, of course. Boccaccio’s verses, according to Duffell, are about 70% duple time. The proportions of duple to triple that Duffell cites for the Continental sources, and for Chaucer’s contemporary Gower writing in French, are these (Duffell 1996: 217):

Boccaccio 70%  Thibaud 56%  Orleans 60%
Petrarch 79%  Machaut 61%  Villon 48%
Gower 78%  Froissart 60%  Ronsard 50%.

18 The latter scansion is strict but somewhat forced; the scansion with three triples is the more natural reading.
7. From the Continent to Chaucer

Chaucer’s first extended composition in decasyllabic verse, the *Parliament of Fowls*, written after his second trip to Italy in 1378, when he became familiar with Petrarch and Boccaccio, fully supports Duffell’s claim that Chaucer invented\(^\text{19}\) the iambic pentameter by the simple device of “excluding triple-time” rhythm in the close of the line. Iambic feet, which correspond to duple rhythm, are nothing new in the language at the time Chaucer started writing, of course: The *Ormulum* is monotonously and almost exceptionlessly duple. Chaucer’s real originality lies in producing a new entity, the iambic pentameter, out of two familiar patterns: the iambic foot and the decasyllabic line.

Duffell’s view is that Chaucer’s verse is essentially constant, in the proportion of duples to triples, from the very beginning. Summing up all his sampling of Chaucer’s decasyllabic verse, his figure is that Chaucer had only 3% triple rhythm. Even with a much less limiting definition of “triple”, we have found only about 6%. Chaucer thus went far beyond his Italian models in his duplicity.

8. On duples and triples in Chaucer

What are the possibilities of “duple” vs. “triple” – or rather, where do the triple rhythmic groupings commonly show up? As has often been recognised, they are most likely to appear to the left of the caesura; most frequently the triple rhythmic effect is the result of trochaic reversal at the left edge of the line.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(28)} & \\
1 - 0 & 0 1 & -- 0 & 1 - 0 1 - 0 1
\end{align*}
\]

\[
Whit \ was \ hir \ smok, \ and \ broyden \ al \ bifoore
\]

\[
(Miller’s \ Tale \ 3238)
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(29)} & \\
1 - 0 & 0 1 & -- 0 & 1 - 0 1 - 0 1
\end{align*}
\]

\[
Pipen \ he \ koude \ and \ fisshe \ and \ nettes \ beete
\]

\(^{19}\) According to Saintsbury (1923: 161-162) there might be some slender evidence that Chaucer did not invent the decasyllabic line in English. We do not think that the appearance of occasional earlier examples of decasyllables within predominantly octosyllabic verse damages in any way the claim that Chaucer was the originator of the iambic pentameter in English, and anyway, in Barney’s nice phrase (personal communication), Chaucer “was certainly the founder of it in deed”.
If the verse contains two triples, it necessarily has only four strong syllables, and the triple may cross the caesural boundary:

\[(30)\]
\[
0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 0 \quad 1
\]
\[\text{With hym ther was dwellynge -- a poure Scoler}\]

(Miller’s Tale 3190)

\[(31)\]
\[
1- \quad 0 \quad 0 \quad 1 \quad 0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 0 \quad 1
\]
\[\text{OR [ } 1 \quad 0 \quad 0 \quad 1 \quad 0 \quad -- \quad 1 \quad 0 \quad 1 \quad 0 \quad 1]\]
\[\text{Which that he louede -- moore than his lyf}\]

(Miller’s Tale 3222)

In the General Prologue (858 lines), there are 52 solid triples, most often at the left edge and lexically fixed, e.g.

\[(32)\]
\[
1- \quad 0 \quad 0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad -- \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 1
\]
\[\text{Redy to weenden -- on my pilgrimage}\]

(Prologue 21)

\[(33)\]
\[
1- \quad 0 \quad 0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 1- \quad 0 \quad 1
\]
\[\text{Vnder his belt he bar ful thriftily}\]

(Prologue 105)

---

20 The question of whether the existence of lines with two triples justifies the description of Chaucer’s verse as a four-stress meter - the so-called “four-beat heresy” stated perhaps best by Lewis (1938) and defended by Southworth (1954) and Frye (1957) - is outside the scope of this paper, but we should note that the obvious origin of this view is indeed the existence of triple rhythm in duple-based verse, since two triples in a verse necessarily leaves room for only four beats.

21 The rime is with carpenter. This fact forces the scansion as indicated. One more clarification related to our principle (d) should be added. Adjacent non-lexical items are assigned prominence on the basis of context and relative communicative weight. We promote of in:

\[\text{Ne of his wo ne dorste he nat byginne}\]  
\[\text{(Tr. I.503)}\]

but we count it as the first syllable of a triple in:

\[\text{Or feynede hire she nyste, oon of the tweye}\]  
\[\text{(Tr. I.494)}\]

It will be unstressed in:

\[\text{And lat me sterve, unknowne, of my destresse}\]  
\[\text{(Tr. I.616)}\]

22 Since there is nothing metrically extraordinary about a headless line, or about a monosyllabic <moore>, we prefer the scansion with two triples because it preserves the prosodic prominence of moore over than.

While our conservative count shows triples appearing about twice as often as by Duffell’s criteria, it is still the case that the overall figure of triples is not impressive. The same is true of our sampling of *The Knight’s Tale*, *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, and *The Miller’s Tale* – the figures stay below 7%:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>text</th>
<th>number of lines</th>
<th>lines containing triples</th>
<th>% of lines with triples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The General Prologue</td>
<td>858</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Knight’s Tale</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wife of Bath’s Prologue</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Miller’s Tale</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers are somewhat higher (up to around 7%) if we include in our counts not only the very clearly lexically and morphosyntactically forced triples, but also more ambiguous ones, for which the realisation of the rhythmical triple might well depend on the performer’s or reader’s own priorities. This means that for some lines such as these from the *General Prologue* (examples in (35))

(35)  
But, *for to tellen* yow of his array  
*That of hir smylyng* was ful symple and coy;  
*This is to seyn*, a Monk out of his Cloystre  
*Noon of his bretheren cam ther in his haunt*  
And rounded *as a belle out of the presse.*

one could imagine two acceptable scansions: One, placing morphosyntactic weight above the predominant pattern of duple alternation, resulting in triple rhythm for the embolded groups, and one, often ridiculed as “mechanical”, which respects the duple alternation which is the metrical core of the poem in violation of the relative morphosyntactic prominence of the monosyllables, thus:

(36)  
But, *FOR to tellen yow of his array*  
*That OF hir smylyng* was ful symple and coy;  
*This IS to seyn*, a Monk out of his Cloystre  
*Noon OF his bretheren cam ther in his haunt*  
And rounded *AS a belle out OF the presse.*
It would be impossible to incorporate such rhythmically, but not metrically, ambiguous lines into a strict template. The way to deal with them, we believe, is to assign the ambiguous sequences an intermediate position between the clearly alternating duple rhythm and the clear triples as in (32)-(34) above. In allowing for this “middle” rhythmical ground, we extend Youmans’s idea that metricality is a gradient concept (Youmans 1996: 190) to the rhythm associated with a particular meter. Thus we would argue that Chaucer, in creating the iambic pentameter, allowed both clear triples and “fuzzy” triples; the latter did not have Continental predecessors.

9. Alternative analyses of triples

The occurrence of triples in Chaucer’s best verse has led some metrists especially Lewis (1938) and including Frye (1957), I. Robinson (1971), Southworth (1954), to claim a degree of similarity, even possible influence and “continuity”, between earlier accentual verse and the mature Chaucerian line. We believe that this is truly a red herring and that there is no connection. Weismiller (1989), in a study where he brilliantly links the occurrence of triples in English Romantic and Victorian verse to what he calls the “freeing” of verse, though we agree with most of the rest of his argument, is in our opinion wrong to claim that “genuine triple rhythms in English originate in strong-stress meter” (Weismiller 1989: 282). Chaucer’s pentameter derives from Italian models which had a characteristic mix of duples and triples. The earlier Middle English traditions, on the other hand, were either almost entirely duple (like Orm’s 4 / 3+1) or predominately triple (like many of the popular ballads) – that is, there were true trisyllabic feet, which is not the case in Chaucer.

The impression that Chaucer wrote a five-foot four-stress hybrid is based on the relative frequency of triples (including trochaic inversions) in Chaucer’s verse. As Weismiller (1989) argues, this lead to substantially greater freedom in the form of later pentameter. Unlike the metrists who adhere to the Halle – Keyser tradition, Weismiller analyses initial inversions as triples in a basically duple rhythm (1989: 281)25, citing examples like (32)-(34) above.

---

24 The issue is insightfully discussed in Baum (1961), esp. appendix 1, though he fails to get to the heart of the matter, the occurrence of triple rhythm amongst underlying duples.

25 Weismiller also lists several other metrists over the past 200 years (1989: 266) who have found it useful to characterise initial inversions and seventh position weak syllables in
One might expect that the particular kinds of variation on strict iambicity that Chaucer confronts us with are largely in those instances where triples may be viewed as calques of the Romance triples. This claim has been made by Weismiller (1989) for post-Renaissance verse, as we noted above; but also specifically for Chaucer, by Guthrie (1988). Guthrie claims: “The key to Chaucer’s variational system lies in its permission of weak-position ternary prominences (anapests), and the majority of these involve purposeful violations of the stress maximum principle” (1988: 31). But there are problems with Guthrie’s analysis, much as we agree with the principle. Here are two examples illustrating his claim: Note that the conflict appears in his help in, where there is a strong syllable assigned to a weak position even though it has weak syllables on both sides. Though we prefer this reading, it does not involve a lexically fixed stress. One could just as well read it [01 01 01 01 01]. The other reading is not forced (whereas a lexical stress forces a reading). In (38) the first triple is forced by the lexical stress in preieth. The second triple is reasonable but not forced.

(37)  
\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
0 & 1 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 1 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 1
\end{array}
\]
\text{rhythm}
\text{So fer am I -- from his help in derknesse} \quad \text{(TC I.18)}

(38)  
\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 & -- 0 \\
1 & 0 & 0 & 1
\end{array}
\]
\text{And preieth for hem -- that ben in the cas} \quad \text{(TC I.29)}

We conclude from these examples that Guthrie’s analysis is wrong: He finds numerous triples where they are not forced by lexical stress and where the scansion is therefore dubious. Guthrie senses part of the correct generalisation: “Chaucer’s stress contour ... suggests the background presence of the Romance line, with its characteristic tendency toward stress at positions 4, 7, and 10” – de-DUM de-DUM, de-de-DUM de-de-DUM. While Guthrie claims that certain examples favour “a rising rhythm in the phrase as a whole”, the claim does not stand up to close inspection because it entails a predominance of triples after the caesura, whereas our scansion show triples much more frequently before the caesura. Even his best cases, like the ones below, do not in general “rise” in the manner of the Romance fragmento adónico:

(39)  
\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 & -- 0 \\
1 & 0 & 0 & 1
\end{array}
\]

duple/ triple terms rather than as “mismatching” within a purely alternating stress template.
And preieth for hem -- that ben in the cas  

(TC I.29)

(40) 0 0 1 0 0 1 -- 0 1 0 1  
ffor whan men han wel cryde -- than wol they rowne  

(TC IV.587)

(41) 0 1 0 0 1 -- 0 0 1 0 1  
And that ye me wolde -- as youre brother trete  

(TC V.134)

The fact is that triples occur before the caesura overwhelmingly more frequently than elsewhere in Chaucer’s verse, and Guthrie’s “rising rhythm” does not exist in Chaucer – it is not part of his “Romance hangover”. His “Romance hangover” is the possibility of allowing triples; but it is not a tendency for triples to occur after the caesura. These are relatively rare. In the Prologue, with 50 triples, only seven appear after the caesura:

(42) 46: Trouthe and honour, FREedom and CURteisye  
100: CURteys he WAS, LOWely, and SERuysable  
195: And for to festne his hood VNder his CHYN  
324: That from the tymne of kyng WILliam weere FALle.  
393: Aboute his nekke, VNder his ARM adown.  
680: But hood, for Iolitee, WEred he NOON.  
774: To ride by the weye DOUMB as the STOON

It is important to note, however, that Guthrie is right in claiming that a strict “matching” analysis cannot cope with triples, because it makes them all appear to be grossly deviant where a rhythmical reading with triples in the right places gives variation without a sense of violation though certainly deviant from the norm. A closely similar argument is made by Weismiller (1989: 265-267) with respect to the opening lines of Donne’s “Twicknam Garden”:

(43) Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares,  
Hither I come to seeke the spring.

A simple “matching” analysis (following Halle — Keyser) also does not capture the correct generalisation.

---

26 Cited from the Ellesmere manuscript. In Hengwrt, this line lacks the second the and should therefore preserve the -e on weye, producing a perfectly regular duple scansion across the line.
10. Conclusions

10.1. Fourteenth-century English had a lexical and phrasal tendency toward iambic rhythm (above, below, beyond, on top, annoy, the boy, my word, compel, ...). This shows up in iambic verse long prior to Chaucer.

10.2. But iambic rhythm did not exist as a design feature in the Romance X(I).

10.3. Chaucer imposed, as a design feature, his native iambic rhythm onto his English version of the X(I).

10.4. But underlying rhythms of the Romance X(I) sometimes surfaced, with about 6% triples throughout his work.

References

Barber, Charles — Barber, Nicolas

Barney, Stephen A.

Baum, Paul

Benson, Larry D. (ed.)

Bischoff, Otto

Duffell, Martin J.


n.d. “The craft so long to lerne”: Chaucer’s invention of the iambic pentameter. [Unpublished manuscript.]

Frye, Northrop

Gasparov, M.L.


Minkova, Donka 1997  “Constraint ranking in Middle English stress-shifting”, English Language and Linguistics 1: 135-175.


Ruggiers, Paul G. (ed.)

Saintsbury, George

Schipper, Jakob
1895 Grundriß der englischen Metrik. Vienna.

Skeat, Walter W.

Smithers, Geoffrey Victor

Southworth, John G.

Tarlinskaja, Marina
1992 Strict stress-meter in English poetry compared with German and Russian. Calgary: The University of Calgary Press.

Ten Brink, Bernhard

Weismiller, Edward R.

Wild, Friedrich

Youmans, Gilbert