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In Appreciation of Metrical Abnormality: Headless Lines and Initial Inversion  
in Chaucer

In Memory of Alan Gaylord

Departures from metrical norms and rules are not usually well liked by people working on metre, for understandable reasons. When you are trying to work out the regularities of a poet's metrical system, exceptions to such regularities are a nuisance, and (to speak from personal experience) it is enormously satisfying to read and to produce research that makes them go away. In the field of Old and Middle English we are blessed with ways of achieving this goal. For instance, it may be possible to show that exceptions are scribal rather than authorial, or that they have some linguistic peculiarity in common that makes them regular after all. The favourite word in metrical scholarship for exceptions that cannot be explained away by such means is 'licenses'. The word grants immunity from prosecution to poets found deviating from the rules, but it is firmly on the side of law and order, and does not attempt to comprehend the purpose of 'irregular' behaviour on its own terms. Critics more accepting of such behaviour often say that poets adopted it 'to avoid monotony',<sup>1</sup> but this does not get us much further. Are we really to believe that, when a poet – say Shakespeare – wrote a line that is metrically atypical, he did so for the sake of introducing variation? As a form of logical reasoning, this explanation is rather limited (Shakespeare did things differently so as to do the same), and as an explanation of how a poet works it is more limited still. If a good poet arranges her words in an unusual metrical pattern, she presumably does so

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, G.L. Brook, who in his edition of the Harley Lyrics explains the substitution of a four-beat line verse by a three-beat line as a 'form of licence to avoid monotony': *Harley Lyrics* (Manchester: Manchester university Press, 1956), p. 18. It is salutary to read Thomas G. Duncan on this argument: 'And with the phrase "a form of licence to avoid monotony", all further analysis [...] is abandoned' ('Two Middle English Penitential Lyrics: Sound and Scansion', in *Late Medieval Religious Texts and Their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A. I. Doyle*, ed. Alastair Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 55-65 (56).

because she think the pattern fits what he wishes to convey, and not just because she fancies a change.

My aim in this essay is to take sides with metrical abnormality and to write more appreciatively than I have seen others do about two ‘licences’ that Chaucer took, both in his short four-beat verse and in his iambic pentameter. In the short line Chaucer’s normal metrical template was x/x/x/x/(x) (where x stands for an unaccented syllable, / for a beat, and (x) for an optional final offbeat); in the longer line it was x/x/x/x/x/(x). An anacrusis, that is, an unaccented syllable at line opening, was evidently the norm in Chaucer, but he sometimes opened his line with a beat, either through initial inversion (also known as ‘trochaic inversion’ of the first foot), yielding /xx/x/x/(x) in the short line and /xx/x/x/x/(x) in the long line, or by suppressing the initial offbeat altogether, resulting in a ‘headless’ line (/x/x/x/(x) or /x/x/x/x/(x)) that is a syllable shorter. I am interested, firstly, in how Chaucer used these patterns, and, secondly, in whether there are any precedents for his usage in earlier English poetry.

That Chaucer permitted himself both two variations is now generally accepted.<sup>2</sup> Of the two, initial inversion has been the least contentious (though, as shall see, it is just as rare in Chaucer’s short lines as headless lines are in Chaucer’s long lines), possibly because it has been a feature of English iambic poetry through the ages. However, the fact that Chaucer wrote headless verses has been disputed, and indeed many English poets through the ages did not countenance them. Alexander Pope, for instance, strictly avoided them,<sup>3</sup> and so did Chaucer’s contemporary John Gower. None of the octosyllabic verses in Gower’s *Confessio* is truncated,<sup>4</sup> and I have also found no headless lines in the 375 pentameter lines of Gower’s s

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<sup>2</sup> A good recent summary of Chaucer’s metrical system is provided by Donka Minkova, in ‘The Forms of Verse’, in *A Companion To Medieval English Literature and Culture c.1350 - c.1500*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 176-195. Minkova accepts both headless lines and lines with initial inversion as possible variations on Chaucer’s normal metrical structure.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Marin J. Duffell, *A New History of English Metre* (London: MHRA, 2008), pp. 90-91.

poem ‘In Praise of Peace’.<sup>5</sup> Trochaic inversion of the first foot (and the second and third) is vanishingly rare in Gower’s octosyllabic line,<sup>6</sup> but more common in his pentameter. Gower was stricter than Chaucer with regard to the syllable count. After the manner of French syllable-counted poetry he always wrote lines of eight syllables (in his tetrameters) or ten (in his pentameters), not counting optional feminine line endings.<sup>7</sup> It is the existence of this tradition of strict syllable-counted poetry that explains Chaucer’s personal apology for headless lines in *The House of Fame*, where he asks Apollo, the God of wisdom, to make his poetry ‘agreable / Though som vers fayle in a sillable’ (1097-8).<sup>8</sup>

Admitting that Chaucer took liberties with the anacrusis is one thing; but learning to love them is another, and the history of metrical scholarship is one of grudging acceptance rather than enthusiasm. W.W. Skeat, who claims to have been the first person to notice the existence of headless lines,<sup>9</sup> conceded that Chaucer ‘allowed himself to accept the principle of dropping the first syllable of the line’.<sup>10</sup> In his editorial practice, however, Skeat set about restoring the anacrusis. In Derek Pearsall’s words, ‘what Chaucer “allowed himself to accept” is clearly something that Chaucer accepted against his better judgment, or, more properly,

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<sup>5</sup> Ed. G.C. Macauley, in *The English Works of John Gower*, EETS o.s. 39, 56 (London: Oxford University Press, 1900-1901), 2 vols, II, pp. 481-494.

<sup>6</sup> Edward F. Shannon, ‘Chaucer’s Use of the Octosyllabic Verse in the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame*’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 12 (1913), 277-94.

<sup>7</sup> G.C. Macauley (ed.), *English Works of John Gower*, I, pp. cxx-cxxi.

<sup>8</sup> All Chaucer quotations are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). I am not convinced by Paull F. Baum’s argument that Chaucer here ‘means that some syllable in a line may here and there be not altogether right, metrically’, and points up this meaning in ‘fayle in a sillable’ by ‘forcing the metrical stress on *a* and on the suffix *-able*’: *Chaucer’s Verse* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1961), p. 7. In alternating rhythm the second of three unstressed syllables will naturally be perceived as accented (so there is no question of ‘forcing’ it), while a French-derived noun ‘often retains its original accent in Chaucer’: Bernhard ten Brink, *The Language and Metre of Chaucer*, rev. Friedrich Kluge, trans. M. Bentinck Smith (London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 199. Cf. the pronunciation of ‘silable’ (also with stress on the second syllable) in Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, 2049, in Macauley (ed.), *English Works of John Gower*.

<sup>9</sup> But note John Dryden in the ‘Dedication and Preface’ to his *Fables*: ‘It were an easy matter to produce some thousands of his verses which are lame for want of half a foot [...] and which no pronunciation can make otherwise’: *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. Paul Hammond and David Hopkins (Harlow: Longman, 1995-2005), 5 vols, V, pp. 33-90 (p. 70).

<sup>10</sup> W.W. Skeat (ed.), *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1894), 6 vols, VI, p. lxxxviii.

against Skeat's better judgment, and the way is clear for the editor to remove as many of these unfortunate evidences of indulgence as he decently can.'<sup>11</sup> Bernhard Ten Brink drew a distinction between Chaucer's short line, where 'the anacrusis may [...] be suppressed', and the long line, where this should not be allowed:

Personally, when in reading a Chaucerian poem in heroic metre I come upon a verse without anacrusis, I experience a jarring sensation for which I should be loth to make the poet responsible.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, headless pentameters should be attributed to Chaucer's scribes rather than to the great man himself. That this view is untenable was demonstrated by Markus Freudenberger, who showed that many headless lines in Chaucer have overwhelming manuscript support, but he, too, says nothing in their favour. Headless lines are genuine, he concludes, but 'whether Chaucer let them slip without notice or whether he was conscious of their abnormality is practically impossible to determine'.<sup>13</sup> In view of Chaucer's above-cited comments in *The House of Fame*, Freudenberger assumes that Chaucer knew what he was doing.

Needless to say, I share this assumption, but I do wish that something more positive was said about Chaucer's 'abnormality'. In this essay I shall attempt to do so by analysing the kinds of situations in which Chaucer saw fit to begin his line with a stressed syllables My study is based on an in-depth analysis of three poems, two in long-line verse, *The Knight's Tale* and *the Nun's Priest's Tale*, and one, *The Book of the Duchess*, in short-line verse. To indicate that the patterns I observe in these poems are general ones in Chaucer, and go back to earlier English poetry, I also discuss some examples from Chaucer's other works and from

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Pearsall, 'Chaucer's Meter: The Evidence of the Manuscripts', in Tim W. Machan, *Medieval Literature: Texts and Interpretation* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1991), pp. 41-57, repr. in *The Art of Chaucer's Verse*, ed. Alan T. Gaylord (Routledge: New York, 2001), pp. 131-144 (p. 132).

<sup>12</sup> Ten Brink, *Language and Metre of Chaucer*, p. 215.

<sup>13</sup> Markus Freudenberger, *Über das Fehlen des Auftaks in Chaucers heroischem Verse*, Erlanger Beiträge zur Englischen Philologie IV (Erlangen, Deichert, 1889), p. 84 (my translation from the German).

an older English poem, *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300).<sup>14</sup> My research suggests that it makes sense to consider initial inversion and headlessness together. Certainly, the two licences differ with regard to the syllable count, and there is good evidence to show that poets were sensitive to this difference, but the effect of both licences is comparable, and, as shall see, Chaucer used them in the same situations.

Let us begin with some facts and figures. Edgar Shannon usefully provided some hard numbers in his study of Chaucer's octosyllabic verse. Comparing Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* with *The House of Fame*, he notes that the percentage of headless lines is fact higher in the latter (13.6%) than in the former (10.2%). Since *The House of Fame* is also chronologically later, the headless line cannot be regarded as a sign of immaturity in Chaucer.<sup>15</sup> Trochaic inversion, which metrists have found less objectionable, is actually infrequent in both poems. Shannon found 24 examples in *The Book of the Duchess* (1333 lines), which amounts to 1.8%, and only 17 in *The House of Fame* (2158 lines), which is 0.8%.<sup>16</sup> These are remarkably low figures, and, having examined Shannon's examples of trochaic inversion in *The Book of the Duchess*, I believe the real numbers are lower still. Various instances listed by Shannon are problematic: he posits disyllabic pronunciation for a word ('whether?') that is often monosyllabic in Chaucer (whatever the manuscript spelling);<sup>17</sup> he assumes inflectional –e in contexts where this is questionable,<sup>18</sup> while the scansion of lines

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<sup>14</sup> I examined lines 12527-13961, in the edition by Richard Morris (ed.), *Cursor Mundi*, EETS o.s. 57, 59, 62, 66, 68, 999, 101 (London: Oxford University Press, 1874-1913), 7 vols, III. Quotations are from the Fairfax manuscript unless otherwise indicated, and thorns and yoghs have been modernised.

<sup>15</sup> Shannon, 'Chaucer's Use of the Octosyllabic Verse', pp. 279-281.

<sup>16</sup> Percentages have been rounded up/down to the first decimal place.

<sup>17</sup> This affects the scansion of *Book of the Duchess*, 121 and 1134 (1133 in Shannon's numbering). Manuscript spelling cannot be taken as reliable guide. For instance, as Friedrich Wild observed (*Die sprachlichen Eigentümlichkeiten der wichtigeren Chaucer-Handschriften und die Sprache Chaucers* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1915), p. 281), metre demands monosyllabic *wher* ('whether') at CT I.1125, even though the manuscripts have a disyllabic spelling. Cf. *Book of the Duchess*, 886. Even if the form *whether* were disyllabic, trochaic inversion cannot be assumed. See my comments about disyllabic function words below.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, at *Book of the Duchess*, 110, 'Helpe me out thys dystresse', we are dealing with an imperative of a verb that was strong and so did not take inflectional –e, as the subsequent line confirms, 'And yeve me grace my lord to se', and at 736, 'Nolde nat love hir, and ryght thus', we are dealing with an auxiliary that could or could not take final –e (cf. CT III.1842, VII.76).

with disyllabic function words (e.g., prepositions such as ‘under’ and ‘after’) in initial position (and not just there) is more complicated than Shannon allows. Readers who are used to parsing iambic verse may have noticed how frequently such disyllables occur in positions where an iambic foot might be expected, both in Chaucer and in other poets. For instance:

After my yonge childly wyt (*Book of the Duchess*, 1095)

After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe (I.125)<sup>19</sup>

She longed so after the king (*Book of the Duchess*, 83)

And heeld after the newe world the space (I.176)

After out sentence plaining comes too late (Shakespeare, *Richard II*, I.iii.471)<sup>20</sup>

After thy innocent and busy stir (Wordsworth, *Prelude* 4.34)<sup>21</sup>

Of course, when pronounced in isolation such disyllables carry word stress on the first syllable, but what makes them malleable in verse is that in connected sentences both syllables are likely to be unstressed. In normal pronunciation, then, *Book of the Duchess*, 1095 is not stressed as /x/x/x/, but rather as xxx/x/x/, and I.176 not as x/x/x/x/x/x, but as x/xxx/x/x/x. And, given the expectations of the metre, three unstressed syllables can easily be assimilated to an iambic pattern. As Derek Attridge has observed, there are ‘times when the indefiniteness of stress in a minor category word allows two possible scansion, and the line hovers between them’.<sup>22</sup> His examples – ‘That comes to all, but torture without end’ (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.67), and ‘Pride, Malice, Folly against Dryden rose’ (Pope, *An Essay on*

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<sup>19</sup> In this and in all subsequent line references where no text is named, examples are from the *Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>20</sup> This and all subsequent quotations from Shakespeare are from *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. J.W. Craig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> William Wordsworth, *Complete Poetical Works* (London: Macmillan, 1888).

<sup>22</sup> Attridge, *Rhythms*, p.222. Ten Brink called this ‘level stress’: ‘There are altogether three methods conceivable for the reconciliation of accent and rhythm when at variance: either the accent must yield to the exigencies of the verse – accent-shift; or the rhythm must conform to the normal accentuation – inversion of the metrical measure; or finally, in delivery a compromise must be attempted of such a character that the hearer remains conscious both of the natural accentuation and of the claims of the rhythm – level stress – veiled rhythm (*Language and Metre of Chaucer*, p. 190). In his examples (p. 224), disyllabic closed-class words are well represented.

*Criticism*, 458) – illustrate the flexibility of disyllabic function words: word stress on the stronger syllable can certainly elevate it to a metrical beat, but the fact that function words are typically unstressed in a sentence also makes it possible for that syllable to function metrically as an offbeat.

It is remarkable how unusual trochaic inversion is when compared with headlessness in Chaucer's short-line verse. The contrast with Chaucer's pentameter is striking in this regard. The Nun's Priest's Tale (626 lines) provides some revealing figures. By my reckoning (more conservative than Shannon's) there are 43 cases of initial inversion in the Nun's Priest Tale (6.9%),<sup>23</sup> but only 9 cases of headless lines (1.4%).<sup>24</sup> It appears that in his short line the syllable count mattered less to Chaucer than the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, while the reverse is true for his long line. This makes sense. As Attridge has noted, the rhythm of the four-beat line is more insistently dipodic (i.e. alternating between beat and offbeat) than pentameter rhythm,<sup>25</sup> and since headlessness, unlike initial inversion, does not affect dipodic rhythm, Chaucer was naturally less inclined to begin his short line with /xx/ than he was to open it with /x/x. Since, however, Chaucer learned his pentameter lines from Romance models, the French decasyllable and the Italian hendecasyllable,<sup>26</sup> which were syllable-counted, and since long-line verse is less insistently dipodic, the long line is, conversely, more hospitable to initial inversion than to headlessness.

Given the dearth of initial inversions in Chaucer's tetrameter verse and the corresponding dearth of headless lines in Chaucer's pentameter, one can understand the

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<sup>23</sup> See 2844, 2881, 2884, 2906, 2923, 2926, 2927, 2933, 2934, 2941, 2969, 2997, 3014, 3052, 3053, 3057, 3065, 3100, 3126, 3130, 3132, 3134, 3139, 3151, 3166, 3185, 3194, 3195, 3199, 3201, 3223, 3228, 3226, 3244, 3267, 3303, 3329, 3332, 3355, 3392, 3409, 3433, 3444.

<sup>24</sup> 2956, 3026, 3164, 3235, 3245, 3256, 3257, 3394, 3440.

<sup>25</sup> In Attridge's words, 'The five-beat line does not bring with it the sense of a strong underlying rhythm; it observes the heightened regularity of movement created by the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, without those rhythmic pulses grouping themselves consistently – and insistently – into twos and fours' (*Rhythms of English Poetry*, p. 126).

<sup>26</sup> On the influence of the Italian model in particular, see Martin J. Duffell, "'The craft so long to lerne": Chaucer's Invention of the Iambic Pentameter', *Chaucer Review* 39 (2000), 269-88.



temptation of trying to emend them out of existence. On closer inspection, however, Chaucer's omission of the initial anacrusis in both types of line turns out to be highly regular – not in the sense that it is statistically normal but in the sense that it tends to occur in predictable circumstances.

There is still much to be learned about these circumstances from an old study by Charles Langley Crow who examined Chaucer's prosody in *The House of Fame* in the light of two earlier English poems in the shorter couplet form, *Harrowing of Hell* (in the Auchinleck manuscript) and the Northern *Cursor Mundi*.<sup>27</sup> Crow noticed some interesting patterns with regard to headless lines in the two earlier English poems: they regularly occur at the start of a section or at the beginning of speeches, and they mark matters of earnest importance. In *Harrowing of Hell*, for instance, Crowley found a clustering of headless lines in emotive speeches, in the dialectical debates of the disputants, and in verses that give orders and exhortations.<sup>28</sup> In *Harrowing of Hell*, this suppression of the anacrusis occurs so often that it is hard to know whether we are dealing with deliberate artistry or not, but in *Cursor Mundi* the percentage of headless lines (10% according to Crowley) is more or less the same as that of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, and the same patterns of usage obtain: in *Cursor Mundi*, too, the anacrusis is dropped at the beginning of sections and speeches. Crowley also observed another pattern in *Cursor Mundi*: headless lines are often found in the context of lists and in emphatic statements.<sup>29</sup> In *The House of Fame*, according to Crowley, Chaucer similarly uses headless lines to mention something striking or extraordinary ('Twenty thousand in a route', 2119),<sup>30</sup> in lists ('By abstinence or by seknesse, / 'Prison-stewe or gret distresse', 25-26; 'Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair', 767); he uses them in asseverations and imprecations ('Turne us every drem to goode!', 58; 'Herke wel, hyt is not rounded', 1030);

<sup>27</sup> Charles Langley Crow, *Zur Geschichte des kurzen Reimpaars Im Mittelenglischen* (Göttingen: Kästner, 1892).

<sup>28</sup> Crowley, *Zur Geschichte*, pp. 13-4.

<sup>29</sup> Crowley, *Zur Geschichte*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>30</sup> Translated into the iambic pentameter this becomes 'Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed' (l.294).

and Chaucer, too, uses them at the beginning of sections and speeches (468, 729, 765, 1066, etc.).<sup>31</sup>

How does Crowley's research stand up against advances in more recent scholarship? I offer a representative example of modern thinking:

The octosyllabic couplet had been used in English poetry for over a century and Chaucer uses it with great freedom. In actual fact the octosyllabic couplet is particularly prone to produce a monotonous and droning measure. But Chaucer infuses its unvarying note with variety by frequent 'enjambement' and by irregularities in the verse (the first metrical foot often has only one syllable, there are unexpected inversions, etc. ...).<sup>32</sup>

Crowley is much more insightful in my view. First, he provides evidence to show that, in allowing 'irregularities' in his verse (including enjambment, as we shall see), Chaucer was not an innovator but a follower of the art of earlier English poetry; second, gets beyond the reductive (and empirically unverifiable) argument that Chaucer took metrical liberties in order to avoid monotony. If Crowley is right, Chaucer and poets before him had more immediate objectives in mind when they began lines with a beat: they wanted, for instance, to announce the beginning of a speech, to mark the transition to a new section, to flag up items in a list, and so on.

I think that Crowley's observations are not only on the right track but also have applicability over and beyond the specific metre he studied (octosyllabic) and the specific phenomenon he was interested in (headless lines). In fact, they apply equally to Chaucer's

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<sup>31</sup> Crowley, *Zur Geschichte*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>32</sup> Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, trans. C.A.M. Sym (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 121.

pentameter verse and to initial his use of initial inversion. A closer look at some of Crowley's categories will hopefully bear this out.

A good category to begin with is that of orders and exhortations, to which we should add interrogatives. Instances can easily be found by looking out for line-initial verbs in the imperative, subjunctive or interrogative. Below are some examples from *The Book of the Duchess*:

*Passe* we over until eft (41)

*Helpe* me out of thys distresse (110)

'*Go* we faste!' and gan to ryde (371)

*Shulde* y now repente me / To love? (1116-7)

The first of these (*pass* is subjunctive plural) is probably a rare instance of an octosyllabic line with with trochaic inversion. Once we recognize this pattern in Chaucer's short line, it is easy to see that he carried it across into his pentameter, where headless lines and initial inversion again frequently coincide with line-initial imperatives, subjunctives and interrogatives, as in the following examples from the Knight's Tale and the Nun's Priest Tale.

Thanked be Fortune and hir false wheel (I.925)

Love if thee list, for I love and ay shal (I.1183)

Seyeth youre avys, and holdeth you apayd (I.1868)

Foyne, if hym list, on foote, himself to were (I.2550)

Seyde he nat thus, 'Ne no fors of dremes'? (VII.2941)

Ware the sonne in his ascenscioun (VII.2956)

Mette he nat that he sat upon a tree / [...?] (VII.3139)

Redeth Ecclesiaste of flaterye (VII.3329)

‘Turneth again, ye proude cherles alle!’ (VII.3409)

Taketh the moralite, goode men (VII.3440)

The last of these lines is a rare headless line, as is probably VII.2996.<sup>33</sup>

When the verb is not merely stating something (indicative) but ordering, asking, exhorting (imperative, interrogative, subjunctive), Chaucer, like poets before and after him,<sup>34</sup> clearly felt there was something to be gained by pushing that verb into the position normally occupied by a quiet unstressed syllable, whether by initial inversion or initial truncation. The bittiness of isolated examples cannot really bring out Chaucer’s design, so it is worth looking at continuous passage. Below is the first stanza from Chaucer’s *Complaint to Mars*:

*Gladeth*, ye foules, of the morowe gray;

Lo, Venus, risen among yon rowes rede.

And floures fressh, honoureth ye this day,

For when the sunne uprist then wol ye sprede.

But ye lovers, that lye in any drede<sup>35</sup>

*Fleeth*, lest wicked tonges yow espye.

Lo, yond the sunne, the candel of jelosye! (*Complaint of Mars*, 1-7)

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Norman Davis: ‘Some imperatives of short-stemmed weak verbs are written with –e, but meter seldom shows it to have been pronounced’ (*Riverside Chaucer*, p. xxxiii).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Cursor Mundi*, 13731, 13754, 13785, 13796, etc., and the following examples of headless lines in Shakespeare:

Hark, Ventidius / I do not know (*Antony and Cleopatra* II.ii.16)

Say you so? Then I shall pose you quickly (*Measure for Measure* II.iv.51)

Come my Lord. I’ll lead you to your tent (*1 Henry IV*, V.iv.9)

Know you Don Antonio, your countryman? (*Two Kinsmen of Verona*, II.iv.54)

<sup>35</sup> With this line compare *Troilus and Criseyde* 4.323: ‘O ye loveris, that heigh upon the whiel’, where the headless line marks, as elsewhere in Chaucer (cf. II.20, VII.2239), a direct address to an audience.

I have italicised the verbs responsible for the trochaic inversion, and it surely matters that they are imperatives.

The emphasis provided by the abrupt beginning is obviously one of the factors behind the omission of the anacrusis here. This consideration is also relevant in cases when metrical marking points up rhetorical devices, as in this example from the Knight's Tale:

How greet a sorwe suffreth now Arcite!  
 The deeth he feeleth thurgh his herte smyte.  
 He wepeth, wayleth, crieth pitously;  
 To sleen himself he waiteth prively.  
 He seide, 'Allas that day that I was born!  
*Now* is my prysoun worse than biforn,  
*Now* is me shape eternally to dwelle,  
*Noght* in purgatorie, *but* in helle.' (I.1219-1226)

The last three lines begin with a beat, the final one (a rarer headless line) emphasizing the antithesis ('Noght ... but') and the preceding two reinforcing the anaphora (Now is ...).

Chaucer uses a similar ploy in Saturn's speech:

'*Myn* is the drenchyng in the see so wan;  
*Myn* is the prison in the derke cote;  
*Myn* is the stranglyng and the hangyng by the throte ...' (I.2456-8)

Here, as in the previous passage, Chaucer achieves striking rhetorical effects by combining anaphora with rhythmical inversion.

In contexts of logical (or pseudo-logical) argument, where Crowley noticed the suppression of the initial offbeat in earlier English poetry, the omission of the anacrusis is also a form of rhetorical emphasis. The Nun's Priest Tale provides many delightful examples, because the speakers in the tale are so comically argumentative. Here is Pertelote (a hen!) maintaining that dreams are unreliable:

Nothyng, God woot, but vanitee in sweven is.

*Swevenes* engendren of replecciouns ... (VII.2922-3)

And here is Chauntecleer (a cockrel) adducing the Latin proverb that women cannot be trusted:

For al so siker as *In principio*,

*Mulier est hominis confusio* –

Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is:

*Womman* is mannes joye and al his blis. (VII.3163-6)

The Latin saying has been fully integrated into Chaucer's rhyme scheme and iambic metre (3162 is actually a headless iambic pentameter), and although Chauntecleer gives a preposterous translation of the Latin in the last line of this extract he does replicate the authoritative insistence *Mulier est hominis confusio*. The metrical inversion in 'Womman is', echoing the line-initial beat of *Mulier est*, recreates the sound of table-thumping logic. Chantecler adopts the same hectoring tone when he expounds the saying that 'murder will out':

O blisful God, that art so just and trewe,

Lo, how that thow biwreyest mordre alway!

*Mordre* wol out, that se we day by day.

*Mordre* is so wlatdom and abhomynable

To God, that is just and resonable,

That he ne wol not suffre it heled be,  
 Though it abiye a yeer, or two, or thre.

*Mordre* wil out; this my conclusioun. (VII.30513256-7)

This is the prosody of a logician who thinks he has hit the nail on the head.<sup>36</sup>

In the cases of line-initial imperatives, subjunctives and interrogatives, however, we need to consider the possibility that prosody served not only for emphasis but also to guide interpretation by clarifying grammar. In Modern English, punctuation performs this crucial hermeneutic function. The imperative mood of a verb can be indicated with an exclamation mark, the interrogative with a question mark, and so on. In an age when writers did not have our system of punctuation at their disposal (and could not trust any of the punctuation marks they did use to be accurately transmitted), metre may have had a clarifying function like that of modern punctuation.

The use of line-initial beats to mark the beginning of new sections, speeches and addresses, which Chaucer must have learned from earlier English poetry,<sup>37</sup> can similarly be considered both as a form of emphasis and as a form of signposting equivalent to punctuation. In a modern edition, where new sections are typically indented and where speech is marked with inverted commas, the rhetorical effect is perhaps the first thing we

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<sup>36</sup> There is other fine examples in Chaucer (e.g. VII.3245). Particularly good is l.658. In *The Book of the Duchess* the corrections the Black Knight offers to his own reasoning and that of Chaucer's are marked by headlessness (1045, 1075, 1115, 1137).

<sup>37</sup> Crowley's observations apropos of *Harrowing of Hell* and *Cursor Mundi* are well founded. In my sample from *Cursor Mundi*, the poet's tendency to begin new sections (usually marked with paraps in the manuscripts) with a line-initial beat is plain to see. For instance:

¶ leue we him a litel quyle (13000)  
 ¶ Lordingis in that ilk cuntree (13360);  
 ¶ Efter that this signe was done (13520)

Beginnings of speeches are also frequently marked by the absence of anacrusis:

lorde thai saide quat is this man (13529)  
 how gat thou thi sight quod thai (13565)  
 ¶ herde ye this lurdan, quod thai (13660)

notice. Here, for example, is Chaucer's transition from Theseus' philosophical reflections as it appears in the *Riverside Chaucer*:

[ ' ]I rede that we make of sorwes two  
 O parfit joye, lastynge everemo.  
 And looketh now, wher moost sorwe is herinne,  
 Ther wol we first amenden and begynne.

'*Suster*', quod he, 'this is my fulle assent...' (I.3071-5)

The initial inversion in the address '*Suster*' is heard as a break in the iambic metre, which reinforces Theseus' shift from one address (*we*) to another (Emily), and from one rhetorical mode (general advice) to another (personal direction). Were we to read this without the aids of a modern edition, however, we might be more conscious of the fact that the initial inversion has a clarifying function equivalent to that of the modern indent and the inverted comma. The widespread use of initial inversion and initial truncation to alert readers (and listeners) to changes of speakers or direct addresses should probably be understood in this context.

*sir* ho said befor thi barnage (*Cursor Mundi*, 13162)

*lorde* ho saide thai are away (*Cursor Mundi*, 13752)

'*Geffrey*, thou wost ryght wel this' (*House of Fame*, 729)

'*Sir*', quod I, 'this game is doon' (*Book of the Duchess*, 538)

'*Sir*', quod I, 'wher is she now?

'*Now*', quod he, and stynte anoon' (*Book of the Duchess*, 1298-9)

'*May*, with alle thy floures and thy grene' (I.1510)

'*Lordynges*', quod he, 'now herkneth for the beste' (I.788)

'*Nay*', quod the fox, 'but God yeve hym meschaunce' (VII.3434)

'*Sir*, your glove.' 'Not mine; my gloves are on' (*Two Kinsmen of Verona* II.ii.1)



‘Gentlemen, importune me no father’ (*Taming of the Shrew*, I.i.48)

It has been suggested that Shakespeare learned this trick from Marlowe,<sup>38</sup> but the continuities of metrical practice in English poetry make it hazardous to claim anyone as an inventor.

The main visual cues that medieval scribes had at their disposal to signal narrative transitions were large capitals and paraphs. In some Chaucer manuscripts (notably Ellesmere and Hengwrt) paraphs and capitals are regularly used to mark new sections. Visual and aural cues frequently coincide:

¶ ffirst in the temple of Venus / maystow se

Wroght on the wal / ful pitous to biholde<sup>39</sup>

The broken slepes / and the sike coldes ... (Ellesmere: I.1918-1920; cf. 1975)<sup>40</sup>

The beginning of the description of the Temple of Venus is here doubly marked by the paraph and the break in the metre (‘ffirst ...’). Of course, paraphs and line-initial beats do not always go together – see, for example, I.1914 – but anyone trying to collect examples of lines without anacrusis will gather a good crop by looking for indents (in modern editions) or for paraphs and large capitals (in medieval manuscripts).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Peter Groves, in an otherwise excellent article, ‘Shakespeare’s “Short” Pentameters and the Rhythms of Dramatic Verse’, in *Stylistics and Shakespeare’s Language: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Mireille Ravassat and Jonathan Culpeper (New York: Continuum, 2011), 119-138.

<sup>39</sup> In this parenthetical line, the trochaic inversion ‘Wroght on the wall’, also clarifies organisation (in this case grammar): see discussion below.

<sup>40</sup> Diplomatic transcriptions of the Knight’s Tale from the Ellesmere manuscript are based on *A Sex-Text Print of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, Chaucer Society Publications, first series, 1 (London: Trübner, 1869), which I have checked against the on-line Ellesmere manuscript (San Marino, Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C9): <http://hdl.huntington.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15150coll7/id/2838>. Otiose final flourishes have been ignored.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., I.1126, I.1975, I.2483.

We have already mentioned that lines without anacrusis sometimes usher in direct speech. Below is an example from the Knight's Tale, where Ellesmere has a large capital instead of a paraph:

And doune he kneleth / with ful humble chere

And herte soor / and seyde in this manere

**F**airest of faire / o lady myn Venus ¶ The preyere of Palamon

(Ellesmere: I.2219-21)

In this category we should also include lines without anacrusis which, conversely, mark the resumption of the story after direct speech, as in the example below:

And euerich of vs / take his auenture

**G**reet was the strif / and long / bitwix hem tweye (Ellesmere: I.1186-7)

Comparing these passages in different Chaucer manuscripts, it is clear that the use of capitals and paraphs is very inconsistent.<sup>42</sup> The aural marking of transitions, even when Chaucer may already have marked them visually, should therefore be regarded not as an added flourish but as a much more future-proof method for signposting narrative segmentation.

As noted by Crowley, another context in which the stressed line opening frequently occurs is the catalogue. From a poetic perspective catalogues are fascinating, and the metrical problems they pose, both for poets and readers, are akin to the intellectual problems we face when we are exposed to 'lists of various items': is every new item just 'more of the same' or is it different? In other words, how do we sort one item from the other? Discerning rhythmical patterns is a form of 'sorting', and Chaucer's catalogues sometimes set us difficult prosodic challenges. Below is a case in point:

But how the fyr was maked upon highte,

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<sup>42</sup> For instance, MS Cambridge, CUL GG. 4. 27, uses very few paraphs and capitals to mark sections; see Furnivall's *Six-Text Print*.

Ne eek the names how the trees highte,  
 As ook, firre, birch, aspe, alder, holm, popler,  
 Wylugh, elm, plane, assh, box, chastein, lynde, laurer,  
*Mapul*, thorn, bech, hasel, ew, whippeltree,  
 How they weren feld shal nat be toold for me ... (I.2919-2924)

One important lesson we learn from this and comparable catalogues (from *Cursor Mundi* to Milton<sup>43</sup>) is that linguistic stress and metrical stress are not the same; rather, metrical stress is abstracted from linguistic stress. In English, each item in a list tends to be stressed (so the linguistic stress pattern of 2921 is x///x/x/). However, as W.K. Wimsatt rightly points out, metre has a coercive effect, and where an iambic metre has been established sequences of evenly syllables (whether unstressed or stressed) will resolve themselves into regular metre.<sup>44</sup>

As Wimsatt put it provocatively, line 2921 is ‘perfectly regular’:

x / x / x / x / x /  
 As ook, firre, birch, asp, alder, holm, popler

Although I accept Wimsatt’s argument, there is, of course, something knowingly irregular about these lines. Making these lines work as iambic pentameter involves us telling our ‘oak’ (beat) from our ‘fir’ (offbeat), and the metrical challenges seem to mount as the list continues. In I.2921 etymology can help us to distinguish ‘alder’ (Germanic, with initial

<sup>43</sup> Cf. ‘mark, luke, matthew his felawes / bot John was sot[i]list in his sawes (*Cursor Mundi*, 13442-3), ‘Yong, fresh, strong, and hardy as lyoun’ (*Troilus*, 5.829), both headless lines, and, with anacrusis, ‘With floures white, blrewe, yelwe, and rede’ (*Parliament of Fowles*, 186), ‘Words, vows, fits, tears and love’s full sacrifice’ (Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* I.ii.440) and ‘Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death’ (*Paradise Lost*, 2.621).

<sup>44</sup> W.K. Wimsatt, ‘The Rule and the Norm: Halle and KEeyer on Chaucer’s Meter’, *College English* 31 (1970), 744-88.

stress) from ‘popler’ (French-derived, with final stress), but in the next line French-derived ‘chestain’ and ‘laurer’ need to be stressed differently, and ‘wylugh’ (willow) needs to be pronounced without the second written vowel (easier to do for Chaucer and his readers, for whom the monosyllabic pronunciation was normal<sup>45</sup>):

x     /    x     /    x     /    x     /    x     /

Wylugh, elm, plane, assh, box, chastain, lynde, laurer,

Finally, in the last line of the list, the trick is to slur the final vowel of ‘hasel’.<sup>46</sup> The line is headless:

/   x     /    x     /    x     /    x     /

Mapul, thorn, bech, hasel, ew, whippeltree,

The lines may be ‘perfectly regular’, but there is a lot to sorting out to be done, as might be expected in a list.

Thus in Chaucer’s catalogues (and those of earlier poets, as Crowley noticed) we often (though by no means always) find a tension between linguistic stress and metrical stress. The frequent occurrence of initial inversion and headless lines in lists (cf. *Book of the Duchess*, 349, 850, 954, 956, I.1926-7, I.1931-2, I.2012, I.2501, I.2509, I.2511, I.2928, IV.869-71) is symptomatic of that tension, which runs through some of Chaucer’s most memorable lines:

And goodly of hire speche in general,  
*Charitable*, estatlich, lusty, fre;

<sup>45</sup> See Wyld, *Sprachlichen Eigentümlichkeiten*, p. 264, who compares *sorwe*, *folwe*, *holwe*, etc.

<sup>46</sup> Ten Brink, *Language and Metre of Chaucer*: ‘A weak *e* in the final syllable before a single final consonant may be slurred if the following vowel begins with a vowel’ (p. 88) Cf. ‘fader of’ (I.2469) and ‘candel at’ (III.334).

Ne never mo ne lakked hire pite;

*Tendre-herted, slydyng of corage ... (Troilus V.822-825)*

The suppression of the anacrusis (note that *Troilus* V.823 and V.825 are headless lines) are a knowing concession to the linguistic reality that in normal language items in an asyndetic list form a succession of beats, though Chaucer, in refusing to surrender entirely to linguistic normality (as when demoting some items in a list to offbeats), acknowledges that making poetry out of normality is an art that requires the agile processing skills of a poet as well as those of his readers.

In catalogues, too, however, deviations from normal prosody have the function of clarifying grammatical relationships. In the passage above, for instance, the line-initial beats on ‘Charitable’ and ‘Tendre-herted’ could be said to do the work that in a modern edition is accomplished by the preceding comma and semi-colon: they signal that we are in list-mode. This hermeneutic function is crucial in cases of enjambment. That Chaucer liked run-on lines has been noticed before (see above, p. ), but I do not think anyone has observed that in Chaucer, and in earlier English verse, enjambment is often followed immediately by a line-initial beat. Below are some examples:

quarfore he saide thus has thou

*haldin the gode wine to nowe (Cursor Mundi, 13407-9)*

Quen herodes herd that ho wald non

*Gift take bot the heued of John (Cursor Mundi, 13168-9)*

This es yur sun, thai said, and yee

*Sai* that blind man born was he. (*Cursor Mundi*, Cotton Vespasian, 13601-2)

Hath wonder that the king ne com

*Hom*, for it was a longe terme (*Book of the Duchess*, 78-79)

But, goode swete herte, that ye

*Bury* my body (*Book of the Duchess*, 206-7)

I was ryght glad, and up anoon

*Took* my hors (*Book of the Duchess*, 356-7)

Right as the humour of malencolle

*Causeth* ful many a man in sleep to crIe (VII.2933-4)

And atte thridde tyme yet his felawe

*Cam*, as hym thoughte ... (VII.3013-4)

Affermeth dremes, and seyth that they ben

*Warnynge* of thynges that men after seen. (VII.3125-6)

That, as of light the somer schene

*Passeth* the sterre ... (*Parliament of Fowles*, 299-300)

Here metre comes to the aid of syntactical comprehension. Sense units and line units normally coincide, and a new line and a new sense unit normally begin with an offbeat; but in

cases of enjambment, where this is not the case, the lack of an anacrusis usefully signals that there is no start of a new sense unit. Instead of an unstressed syllable to mark a new beginning, what we get is linguistic and metrical stress on a word that clamours for our attention because we need it to make sense of the preceding verse. Visual cues to warn readers of enjambment were not unknown to medieval readers and writers,<sup>47</sup> but metrical cues are more stable in manuscript transmission than punctuation marks.

The use of prosody to assist comprehension in cases of enjambment has a clear analogue in constructions where grammatical connections are severed by parenthetical phrases or clauses:

Allas, I se a serpent or a theef,  
 That many a trewe man hath doon mescheef,  
*Goon* at his large ... (I.1325-7)

And yet hath love, maugree hir eyen two,  
*Broght* hem hider (I.1796-7)

That is to seyn wheither he or thou  
 May with his hundred, as I spak of now,  
*Sleen* his contrarie, or out of listes drive (I.1857-9)

Til that the pale Saturnus the colde,  
 That knew so manye of adventures olde,

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<sup>47</sup> See Malcolm Parkes, *Pause and Effect: A History of Punctuation in the West* (London: Ashgate, 1992), pp. 96-97 and Derek Pearsall, 'The Wollaton Hall Gower Manuscript (WLC/LM/8) Considered in the Context of Other Manuscripts of the *Confessio Amantis*', in *The Wollaton Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. Ralph Hanna and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000), pp. 57-67.

*Foond* in his olde experience an art (I.2443-5)

Lo, how that Jacob, as thise clerkes rede,

Be good conseil of his mooder Rebekke

*Boond* the kydes skyn aboute his nekke (IV.1362-4)

As Chauntercleer, among his wives alle,

*Sat* on his perche (CT VII.2883-4; my punctuation)

In all these examples, the italicised verb is one that has been held over after a parenthetical phrase/clause that separates the verb from its grammatical subject. What the prosody does is to ask us to take note of the verb and to remind that we have unfinished business with the main clause. This technique, too, goes back to earlier English poetry.<sup>48</sup>

There are some other interesting patterns in Chaucer's use of initial inversion and headless that cannot be dealt with in detail here but that should be briefly mentioned. Clauses that begin with a present participle or a past participle – e.g. 'With the sharpe swerd over his heed, / *Hangynge* by a soutil twynes threed' (I.2029-30) and 'His cote armure was of clooth of Tars / *Couched* with perles white and rounde and grete' (I.2160-1) – often lack an anacrusis. Here, too, metre has a clarifying function equivalent to modern punctuation. Grammatical inversion involving adjectives ('Bright was the sonne', I.1062, 'Blak was his berd', I.2139) or adverbs 'Stille [quietly] in that feeld he took al nyght his reste' (I.1003), 'Faire in the sond ... / Lith Pertelote' (VII.3267-8) are naturally accompanied by metrical inversion. The class of adverbs that linguists call affirmative adverbs are more likely than

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Cursor Mundi*: 'This foresaide mary magdalayn, within this castel I of talde, mught ho all atte he wolde' (13995-7), and 'Simond, that sir was o that toun, / *Wondred*, and said in his thoght' (14021-2).



others to be involved in inversion and headless lines ('Certes', IV.346, VII.2926, VII.3303, 'Trewly', *Book of the Duchess*, 981, 'Soothly', II.495), as is the adverb 'right' in the sense of 'exactly', 'immediately' (I.2904, VII.2933, VIII.3065). There is much more that could be said, but I want to end this analysis by saying that not all examples are susceptible to grammatical or rhetorical explanations. Sometimes Chaucer simply begins a line with a metrically accented word that does not bear much linguistic stress at all. This class is probably the most offensive to metrical purists, and some have wished it away – 'Probably Mr. Skeat is right in admitting a monosyllabic foot, but it should not be accepted in any particular case, unless the single syllable it contains has a decided stress'<sup>49</sup> – but the class certainly exists:

Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe

*That* no drop ne fille upon hire brest. (I.130-131)

God for his manace hym so soore smoot

[.....]

That in his guttes carf it so and boot

*That* his peynes weren importable. (VII.2599-2602)

These headless lines actually begin with xx/ in terms of linguistic stress, and it is only the metrical expectation of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables that realizes *That* as a beat (note that it is an offbeat in the preceding line).<sup>50</sup> Linguistic rhythms, as have already observed, are sometimes at variance with metrical ones, but as long as they have not

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<sup>49</sup> A.J. Ellis, *On Early English Pronunciation*, Early English Text Society, e.s. 2, 7, 14, 23, 56 (London: Trübner, 1867-89), 5 vols, I, p. 333.

<sup>50</sup> See also IV.1630, *Troilus* I.490, and further examples in Freudenberger, *Über das Fehlen*, p. 12.

modulated too far away from each other, metrical regularity can be extracted from wayward rhythms.

What can we learn from this analysis of lines without anacrusis? One conclusion to be drawn from it is that Chaucer was not in all formal respects the father of English poetry. He may have pioneered the iambic pentameter, but headless lines, initial inversion and enjambment (phenomena that turn out to be closely related) all occur in earlier English poetry, under the same discursive conditions. Chaucer kept the old art alive in his own verse and passed it on to later poets (as we have seen Shakespeare's some of Shakespeare's headless lines are comparable to Chaucer's). A second conclusion is that the licenses he embraced in his short-line verse are also found in his long-line verse, but in inverse proportions. Headless lines, which occur frequently in his short-line verse, are very rare in his long-line verse, and conversely initial inversion, common in Chaucer's pentameter verse, is very rare in his short-line verse. The explanation is probably to be found in the more rigidly dipodic nature of the four-beat line and in the syllable-counted models from which Chaucer developed the pentameter. A third conclusion is that, in both his short-line and his long-line verse, headless lines and initial inversion tend to occur in particular discursive environments – which in turn suggests that Chaucer had particular discursive ends in mind. These obviously include emphasis, as when initial inversion and truncation occur alongside rhetorical devices (anaphora), grammatical inversion, and in the context of logical argumentation. However, they also occur in contexts where metre appears to have an analytical function, for example, in lists and catalogues, at the beginning of speeches and sections, and in sentences where enjambment or parenthetical clauses and phrases create potential difficulties for readers and listeners. In these contexts, the metrical pointing does not primarily serve rhetorical purposes but clarifies narrative segmentation and grammatical

relationships. Of course, the expressive and heuristic functions of metre need not exclude each other, as my discussion of line-initial imperatives, subjunctives and interrogatives will have suggested, but these are complications that cannot detain us any longer. Hopefully, future researchers will prefer such complexities to the simpler view that Chaucer introduced metrical variants to avoid monotony.