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2022-12-05

Heikkinen , S 2022 , Multiple Origins : Some Observations on the Medieval Latin Rhyme . in V Sykäri & N Fabb (eds) , Rhyme and Rhyming in Verbal Art, Language, and Song . Studia Fennica. Folkloristica , no. 25 , Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura , Helsinki , pp. 63-73 , Rhyme and Rhyming in Verbal Art and Song , Helsinki , Finland , 22/05/2019 .

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/352282

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Seppo Heikkinen

Multiple Origins

Some Observations on the Medieval Latin Rhyme

This paper addresses the emergence of rhyme in medieval Latin poetry, a subject that is intriguing, as although rhyme is generally considered a quintessential feature of most poetry in modern languages, it was largely non-existent in classical Latin. In our paper, we set out to trace the origins of medieval Latin rhyme. While its emergence can be attributed to foreign influences, we argue that certain morphological and stylistic features of classical, and even archaic Latin probably played a central role in the feature.

Most readers are aware of the existence of two different types of Latin verse technique: classical and medieval. To put it roughly, their main difference is one of prosody. Classical Latin verse follows a quantitative, or metric, system, where the defining structural feature is syllable length: syllables, or the position which they hold in a metrical unit are divided into long (or, in more modern nomenclature, 'heavy'), short (or 'light') and indifferent. Most medieval verse, or at least its best-known proponents, follows a non-quantitative, or rhythmic, system, where the defining features are the number of syllables, and, especially toward the end of each line, their accentuation. The role of the latter feature sometimes tends to be exaggerated, as accent patterns varied hugely over the Middle Ages from their near-total disregard in, say, early Hiberno-Latin to an almost slavish adherence to regular accentual rhythm in the High Middle Ages. Similarly, the coexistence of metric and rhythmic form of versification throughout the Middle Ages is often ignored.

If we cite, as an example of what most would consider a prime example of 'typical' medieval verse, the opening of the 13th-century *Dies irae* sequence, usually attributed to Thomas of Celano, we can see how this plays out:

> Dies irae, dies ílla
> solvet saeclum in favílla
> teste Dauid cum Sibylla.
> (Raby 1959: 392–93.)

> That day, the day of wrath, dissolves the world to ash, as testified by David and the Sibyll.[1]

1 All translations are by the present author.

https://doi.org/10.21435/sff.25

Each line has a regular number of eight syllables, with no regard for syllable quantity, and the ending of each line has a penultimate (or paroxytone) accent. To employ the abbreviations used by D. Norberg, the structure could be presented as 8p (Norberg 2004: xxiv). In addition, even the beginning and middle of each line are regularly accentuated: *díes írae, díes ílla* etc., making this a representative of high medieval rhythmic verse in its strictest and most regular form.

For the average reader, or singer, these structural features, however, are scarcely the most prominent feature of the text. What really stands out is the employment of regular, two-syllable rhyme: *illa-favilla-Sibylla* (*y* being homophonous with *i* in medieval Latin). (Norberg 2004: 41.) And this, indeed, is yet another quintessential, although not defining, feature of medieval Latin verse. Although not all medieval Latin verse uses rhyme, or uses it far less regularly than our sample, we can see how the rhyme supports the prosodic structure of the regularly accentuated line endings.

It is no wonder then, that end rhyme is seen as one of the central features of medieval rhythmic verse, and this, indeed, seems to have become the consensus by the High Middle Ages. The Venerable Bede, who in his 8th-century treatise *De arte metrica* presented the first creditable definition of rhythmic verse as being composed *numero syllabarum*, or according the number of syllables, makes no mention of rhyme, and, indeed, his examples are unrhymed (Heikkinen 2012: 187–205). In the high medieval *poetriae* such as those of John of Garland and Eberhard the German, however, rhyme is presented as a central feature of verse technique (Lawler 2020; Purcell 1993). It is telling that even the word rhyme is derived from *rhythmus*, by way of such intermediate forms as *ritmus*, *riddimus*, *rimus* etc. (Norden 1898: 825; Klopsch 1972: 49). In other words, we could expand our previous definition of rhythmic verse to include regular end rhyme, at least insofar as high medieval verse is concerned. But this would mean ignoring the fact that much of earlier rhythmic verse is unrhymed, and, perhaps, more strikingly, that rhyme in the Middle Ages was frequently also applied to such classical quantitative verse forms as hexameters and sapphics, not to mention prose. This also does not explain why rhyme became so central a feature of medieval Latin verse, or where it emerged. Rhyme did not simply appear together with rhythmic versification: we can see early symptoms of it in a wide variety of pre-classical, classical and late antique sources, but it took several centuries for it to assume the regular disyllabic form we can observe in the *Dies irae* sequence and, indeed, many of our modern languages.

Early medieval examples of rhyme rarely match the full-fledged high medieval model, often bordering on mere assonance, but this is not to say that the feature is not noticeable. We may cite, as an example, the anonymous 9th-century hymn *Ave maris stella*:

Ave, maris stella,
Dei mater alma,
Atque semper virgo,
Felix caeli porta.

https://doi.org/10.21435/sff.25

> Sumens illud 'ave'
> Gabrielis ore,
> Funda nos in pace
> Mutans Evae nomen.
> (Raby 1959: 94–95.)

> Hail, o star of the sea, merciful mother of God, eternal virgin and blessed gate of heaven. Receiving that 'ave' from the mouth of Gabriel, establish us in peace, changing the name of Eve.

In the first strophe, three of the lines end with *a* (*stella-alma-porta*). In the second strophe, all lines end with *e* (*ave-ore-pace-nomen*), although the last one also has a final consonant. We can see that rhyme has obviously been employed deliberately, although not with the kind of consistency we find in high medieval verse. Also, all the rhymes are monosyllabic. If we look for plausible precursors to medieval rhyme in earlier sources, they generally look very similar to this example.

Early Latin Models

Archaic Latin abounds in features that have their roots in preliterary forms of poetic and rhetorical expression. It shares most of them with other, extinct, Italian languages. These include various forms of wordplay, the most prominent being alliteration, but assonance and rhyme also play a noticeable role. Obviously, these are features that are typical of most oral traditions and have functioned as a memory support. Alliteration and assonance feature, above all, in spells and prayers, and early legal Latin makes frequent use of them in a ritualistic manner. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent rhyme is deliberate in a language the structure of which relies heavily on inflectional endings. The archaising language of Roman law and religion is characterised by its fondness for parallelism and paronomasia, themselves common features of oral poetic traditions, and its pleonastic use of synonyms, which, together with the Latin inflectional system, often results in rhyme as in the formula *dat, dicat, dedicat* [he gives, devotes and dedicates]. In classical literary Latin, however, excessive use of alliteration and rhyme were often viewed as rusticated, although such authors on rhetoric as Cicero (e.g., *In Verrem* 2.1) and Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 9.3.66–74) approved highly of paronomasia, where similar-sounding words are used in conjunction. Famous examples from Cicero include *bonarum artium, bonarum partium, bonorum virorum* [of good skills, good parties, and good men] (*Pro Caelio* 77) and *O fortu**natam natam** me consule Romam* [O happy Rome that was born during my consulship] (*De consulatu suo* 10), later notoriously mocked by Juvenal. In these examples, it is apparent that the rhyme-like effect is deliberate and not merely a by-product of the Latin inflectional system, but, nevertheless, the rhyming words share inflectional forms: this is far from the 'rhyme for rhyme's sake' that became a part of medieval verse technique. It is also worthy of note that the rhyming words are placed next to each other; the concept of using rhyme to end phrases or lines had yet to emerge.

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Apart from Italic traditions of wordplay, one typically Latin feature of poetry and rhetoric may arguably have contributed to the development of rhymed verse. This is the stylistic device known as hyperbaton, which means the separation of an adjective or other attribute from its noun head. A prime example from the High Middle Ages is the line *Tuba mirum spargens sonum* [the trumpet, spreading its wonderful sound] from the *Dies irae* sequence. The words *mirum* [wonderful], and *sonum* [sound], have been separated from each other, creating an additional monosyllabic rhyme in the middle of the line. Hyperbata are exceedingly common in classical Latin poetry. Some of the most celebrated examples can be found in Horace's first *Ode* and its depiction of a chariot race:

> Sunt quos curriculo pulverem Olympicum
> Collegisse iuvat, metaque **fervidis**
> Evitata **rotis**, palmaque nobilis
> Terrarum **dominos** evehit ad **deos**.
> (West 1997: 25.)
>
> There are those whom it pleases to gather the Olympian dust; the turning post, passed by fiery wheels and the palm leaf of victory raises them as lords of the world among the gods.

Here the hyperbata create elaborate inner rhymes, sometimes even overlapping the division of the lines. As, e.g., *fervidis* [fiery], and *rotis* [wheels], belong to the same declension and are in the same case (the ablative), they share the same ending, resulting in rhyme. Here again, however, it is open to question to what extent the rhyme is deliberate or a secondary by-product of the Latin inflectional system and the poet's choice of word order.

A particularly sophisticated form of double hyperbaton is what, at least in the Anglosphere, is commonly referred to as the 'golden line'. This term refers to a line of poetry, usually a hexameter, that consists of two pairs of noun and adjective separated from each other with the verb in the middle; it can be represented as A1-B1-Verb-A2-B2. (See, e.g., Winbolt 1903: 219–21; Wilkinson 1963: 215; Mayer 2002; Heikkinen 2015.) This arrangement of words appears to have been sought, in particular, by bucolic poets of the imperial period and favoured by such Late Latin and medieval poets as the fifth-century Sedulius and the sixth-century Aldhelm. Its first coherent description is given in Bede's 8th-century *De arte metrica*, followed by two celebrated examples from Sedulius's Bible epic *Carmen paschale*:

> But the best and most beautiful arrangement (*optima…ac pulcerrima positio*) of dactylic verse is when the penultimate parts respond to the first ones and the last parts respond to the middle ones (*primis penultima, ac mediis respondet extrema*). Sedulius was in the habit of using this arrangement often as in:
>
> ***Pervia*** *divisi* patuerunt ***caerula*** *ponti*
>
> The penetrable waters (*pervia caerula*) of the divided sea (*divisi ponti*) lay open.
>
> ***Sicca*** *peregrinas* stupuerunt ***marmora*** *plantas*

https://doi.org/10.21435/sff.25

> The dry marble (*sicca marmora*) wondered at the foreign soles (*peregrinas plantas*).
>
> (Bede, *De arte metrica*, ed. Calvin Kendall 1977: 111–112; Sedulius, *Carmen Paschale* 1.136, 1.140.)

The rhyming effect is here emphasised by the fact that the word at the end agrees with the one immediately before the central caesura of the hexameter line. Here, again, it would be tempting to assign to the rhyme the status of a mere by-product, but it appears that Bede himself was of a different opinion. Namely, in his companion work to *De arte metrica*, *De schematibus et tropis* [On schemes and tropes] he also uses the latter of his quotations from Sedulius as an example of homoeoteleuton:

> Homoeoteleuton is a similar ending, whenever the middle and end of a line or sentence end with a similar syllable…Poets use it in this way:
>
> *Sicca peregrinas stupuerunt marmora plantas.*
> (Bede, *De schematibus et tropis*, ed. Calvin Kendall 1977: 149.)

The placement of the rhyming words corresponds precisely with those of the so-called leonine hexameter, which became hugely popular towards the end of the Middle Ages, and it is probable that the golden line contributed strongly to its evolution. Naturally, the high medieval rhyming hexameter differs markedly from the lines from Sedulius cited above, as we can see in this line from the *Carmina Burana*:

> In mundo *summus* rex est hoc tempore *nummus*.
> (Hilka & Schumann 1930: 15.)
>
> Today, money is the highest king in the world.

As we can see, the rhyme is disyllabic; we do not simply have the 'similar final syllable' as described by Bede. Also, the rhyming words do not form a noun-attribute unit. Although the structure may be rooted in the earlier use of the hyperbaton, it has become totally divorced from it, giving us, at last, 'rhyme for rhyme's sake.'

An intriguing feature of medieval leonine rhyme is that, although it is employed in such classical verse forms as hexameters and elegiacs, which, even in the Middle Ages were composed strenuously according to the rules of classical syllable quantity, vowel length is irrelevant from the point of view of rhyme, e.g., Hugh the Primate in his epigram against the dilution of wine:

> In cratere meo / Thetis est sociata Lyaeo.
> (Hilka & Schumann 1970: 28.)
>
> In my chalice, Thetis (water), is together with Bacchus (wine).

Metrically, the hexameter line is faultless but note that *meo* (with a short *e*) rhymes with *Lyaeo* (with a long one).

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Foreign Influences

Efforts have been made to attribute the Latin rhyme to Semitic models (e.g., Dihle 2013: 572). Monosyllabic end rhyme was a defining feature of Arabic and Syriac verse (Scott 1997: 7; Catholic answers/encyclopedia/ syriac-hymnody; Reynolds, this volume), but it also appears in two verse pamphlets written in late antique North Africa: *Psalmus contra partem Donati*, composed against the Donatist heresy by Augustine of Hippo, and *Psalmus contra Vandalos Arrianos*, written by Fulgentius of Ruspe against Vandals, practitioners of the Arian heresy (Hunink 2011). These 'psalms' constitute something of a curiosity in Latin literature, as, in structure, they are strikingly dissimilar to any other poetic compositions of the same period. They feature stanzas in alphabetical order and a refrain together with a fairly regular number of eight or nine syllables per line, with total disregard for syllable quantity, making them, arguably, some of the first representatives of rhythmic verse. They also have simple, monosyllabic end rhyme, which, however, is not used with perfect regularity, and their rhythm is roughly trochaic.

Augustine's hymn, which constitutes the only extant poem by his pen, is possibly modelled after similar polemic verse used by his opponents, the Donatists themselves, and probably has its ultimate origin in the Middle East, where Syriac verse homilies with similar form and content have been documented. Semitic models are also suggested by Augustine's own commentary on the hymn in his Enchiridion, where he both attributes its abecedary structure to Hebrew models and mentions 'Latin and Punic' abedecary hymns; incidentally, this is one of the very last mentions of Punic still being used in North Africa. The opening of the hymn is striking not only in its vernacular tone, but also its radical departure from other contemporary verse:

> Abundantia peccator**um**
> Propter hoc Dominus nost**er**
> omparans regnum caelor**um**
> Congregavit multos pisc**es**…
> (Anastasi 1957: 44.)
>
> Because of the abundance of sinners, our lord, preparing the kingdom of the heavens, collected many fish…

The verse homilies of Augustine and Fulgentius, although intriguing and rare examples of cross-cultural influences, probably had little impact on subsequent Latin poetry, although they exhibit features that became prominent in the Middle Ages. They were not widely known in the Early Middle Ages, as, understandably, the Donatist and Arian heresies had, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist. Ultimately, they must probably be regarded as an isolated phenomenon.

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Celtic Influences

Yet another 'foreign' influence that may have played a role in the evolution of the Latin rhyme is vernacular Celtic verse. We encounter rhyme in early Welsh and Irish verse, and it is at least plausible that Gallic oral poetry shared the same feature. Previously, we observed the use of the golden line in the verse of Caelius Sedulius, together with the rhyming effect in which it often resulted. As Bede asserted, the rhymes in Sedulius's hexameter lines are probably intentional and not merely a result of word order. This comes to the fore even more strongly if we examine Sedulius's hymn *A solis ortus cardine*, composed in iambic dimeters. Here, we have nearly systematic use of monosyllabic end rhyme:

> A solis ortus cardin**e**
> Ad usque terrae limit**em**,
> Christum canamus Princip**em**,
> Ortum Maria Virgin**e**.
> Beatus Auctor saecul**i**
> Servile corpus indu**it**;
> Ut carne carnem liberans
> Ne perderet quos condid**it**.
> (Raby 1959: 39.)

> From the pivot of the sun's rising to the farthest edge of the earth, let us sing to Christ our lord, born of the virgin Mary. The blessed creator of the world assumed the body of his servant, liberating flesh with flesh, that he might not lose what he had made.

This differs markedly from the examples of homoeoteleuton we cited in earlier Latin verse. Rather than internal rhyme, we have genuine end rhyme, with the rhyming syllables holding the final position of each line. We can see that we are on the way towards a system where rhyme has become a defining structural feature.

What made Sedulius so fond of rhyme? It has been – rather questionably – proposed that the reason may be that he was of Irish origin, Sedulius being a Latinised form of the name Sladhal (Woulfe 1923: s.v. Sladhal). As hardly anything is known of Sedulius's life, this can neither be attested nor denied; the Irish hypothesis rests partly on the fact that the 9th-century poet Sedulius Scottus was genuinely from Ireland, and the lives of the two namesakes have become conflated. The proposal also rests on the earlier Sedulius's fondness for rhyme and the influence he had on medieval Irish and Anglo-Latin verse. (Wright 1982.)

As Christianity, together with the Latin language, became established in early medieval Ireland, the Irish scholars ultimately became Latin poets themselves. It is apparent that the early Irish authors had no concept of syllable quantity, which had by this time disappeared from spoken Latin (Roger 1905: 267–68), and the models to which they resorted were primarily those of Late Latin hymns, although cast in a non-quantitative form. It is not surprising that they also made full use of the possibilities of rhyme. The

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seventh-century poem *Versiculi familiae Benchuir* in praise of the monastic family of Bangor, which has been preserved in the Antiphonary of Bangor, is a prime example. The rhyming surpasses virtually anything previously composed in Latin: rhymes are used with unerring regularity in an *abab* arrangement, and often, though not always, they are disyllabic, anticipating high medieval practice by centuries:

> Benchuir bona reg**ula**,
> recta atque div**ina**,
> stricta, sancta, sed**ula**,
> summa, iusta ac m**ira**.
> (Raby 1959: 69.)
>
> The good rule of Bangor, right and divine, strict, holy and sedulous, high, just and wonderful.

The disyllabic rhyme does not always take into account the different consonants before the final syllables (*divina-mira*); in this respect, it follows the practices of vernacular Celtic poetry. The rhymes may also have been inspired by the monosyllabic end rhyme of Late Latin hymnody as we witnessed in Sedulius's *A solis ortus cardine*. In this case, if Sedulius was indeed Irish, we can see this as a very sophisticated case of literary recycling.

Sequence

A novel form of ecclesiastical music and poetry that emerged in the Early Middle Ages is the sequence, also known as *prosa* (Norberg 2004: 158–73). It had its origins in a melisma that was sung at the end of the Alleluia in mass. Originally, such melismata may have been improvised, but later they were written down and supplied with their own texts. As the sequence grew independent of its origins as an appendage of the Alleluia, it nevertheless retained its place between the Alleluia and the proclamation of the Gospel. Although the sequence was influenced by such early Christian hymns as Venantius Fortunatus's *Vexilla regis prodeunt*, it had, from the start, a different structure. The sequence was popularised, above all, by the 9th-century Notker Balbulus, who published a collection of sequences in his *Liber hymnorum*. Early sequences were typically written in rhythmical prose, hence their alternative denomination *prosa*. Typically, an early sequence has a regular number of syllables and regularly accentuated line endings without adhering to a single verse type. Later sequences often have a regular strophic or stichic structure, and some high medieval sequences have even been composed in classical, quantitative metres.

Some early sequences still betray their origin as an appendage of the Alleluia. A case in point is the Aquitanian *Swan Sequence* with the incipit *Clangam, filii*, which was hugely popular for some two centuries. It is an allegorical story of a swan that loses its way over the sea. Structurally, it falls

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somewhere between verse and prose: the lines are of varying lengths but there is a consistency to their rhythm and the accentuation of their cadences. Perhaps its most striking feature is its use of rhyme: every other line ends with the vowel *a,* something that seems to have been a common feature in early French, though not German sequences. We can take this to be a carryover from the origins of the sequence as an embellishment on the final *a* of Alleluia:

> Clangam, filii
> ploratione una
> alitis cygni
> qui transfretavit aequora.
> O quam amare
> lamentabatur, arida
> se dereliquisse
> florigera
> et petisse alta
> maria;
> aiens: ”Infelix sum
> avicula,
> heu mihi, quid agam
> misera?
> (Raby 1959: 90.)
>
> I shall cry out, my sons, of the lament of one winged swan, which traversed the seas. O how bitterly he bemoaned that he had left the dry and flowery land and sought the open seas, saying: “I am an unfortunate little bird, woe to me, what shall I do in my misery?”

Although its dogged use of the final *a* is basically an allusion to the Alleluia, the fact that the sequence uses rhymes at all probably also reflects the general increase in the popularity of end rhyme in early medieval verse.

Concluding Remarks

Rhyme in medieval Latin verse is a fascinating phenomenon, and much more complicated than it seems on the surface. We are best acquainted with the high medieval practice of using regular disyllabic end rhymes, but this was merely a result of a long evolution and multiple influences from archaic spells and prayers, classical peculiarities of word order, the phonetic features of liturgical texts and possible foreign influence, especially by Semitic verse in the Late Antique period, and, in Hiberno-Latin, by Celtic traditions. Essentially, the propensity for rhyme was built into the Latin language from the start: in a language which relies heavily on inflectional endings, avoiding rhyme is actually more difficult than allowing it. Early examples, however, fall into the category of internal rhyme, naturally enough. The evolution of end rhyme cannot be simply attributed to linguistic features, and the concept of deliberately using rhyme to round off sentences or lines of poetry took a long

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time to take root. One probable factor was the emergence of rhythmic verse, the structure of which revolves around the regularly accentuated cadences of lines: disyllabic end rhyme was useful in underlining this feature. At the same, medieval rhyme demonstrates the varied history of Latin verse and the wide variety of influences that helped shape its aesthetic over the centuries.

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