NOTE

ADAM SCRIVEYN AND CHAUCER’S METRICAL PRACTICE

In a recent article in this journal, A. S. G. Edwards casts doubt on the traditional attribution of Chaucer’s *Wordes unto Adam, his Owne Scriveyn* to Geoffrey Chaucer. Edwards begins by questioning the reliability of John Shirley’s attribution of the poem to Chaucer in the unique surviving manuscript copy, Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.20 (second quarter of fifteenth century). He then mobilizes generic, lexical, and thematic evidence indicating that *Adam Scriveyn* (I will use this short title) was composed not by Chaucer but by ‘a person with overall responsibility for overseeing the writing of a manuscript or manuscripts of Chaucer’s works’, in whose voice, Edwards argues, the poem is most comfortably read. The present note supplements the case against Chaucerian authorship of *Adam Scriveyn* with metrical evidence.

*Adam Scriveyn* is composed in the English pentameter, the accentual-syllabic metre that Chaucer invented and popularized. It comprises a single stanza of rhyme royal (rhyming ababbcc), one of the stanza forms invented by Chaucer. With respect to metre, the poem conforms to the normal practice that Chaucer bequeathed to some of his fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poetic successors. A line of pentameter consists of ten or eleven metrical positions, alternating weak and strong, the first and eleventh being optional. The template is thus (x) SxSxSxSxS(x), where ‘S’ represents a strong position and ‘x’ represents a weak position. Assuming elision of ‘ever’ (line 1), stress shift in ‘makyng’ (4), and monosyllabic ‘thorugh’ (7) (<OE þurh), each line of *Adam Scriveyn* fulfils the template of pentameter. Metrical typology gives no grounds for supposing that someone other than Chaucer composed *Adam Scriveyn*.

The evidence of metrical phonology, that is, the linguistic forms that fill out metre, is more informative. The third line of *Adam Scriveyn* reads: ‘Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle’. The line scans SxxSxSxSxSx, with metrical demotion of ‘lokkes’, or perhaps xSxSxSxSxSx, with metrical demotion of ‘lokkes’ and wrenched stress in ‘Under’. Both plausible scansiones require monosyllabic weak plural ‘long’ (as indicated by Shirley’s spelling) and monosyllabic plural ‘lokkes’ (despite Shirley’s spelling). However, leaving aside phonological contexts in which elision may be assumed, weak and/or plural ‘longe’ (41 occurrences) and plural ‘lokkes’ (5 occurrences) scan as disyllables elsewhere in Chaucer’s poetry.
The same is true of the phonologically similar words ‘yonge’ (59 occurrences), ‘stronge’ (26 occurrences), ‘rokkes’ (18 occurrences), ‘stikkles’ (2 occurrences), ‘bukkes’ (‘male deer’) (1 occurrence), ‘cokkes’ (‘roosters’) (1 occurrence), ‘neckkes’ (1 occurrence), ‘pokkes’ (‘pustules’) (1 occurrence), and ‘stokkes’ (‘tree stumps’) (1 occurrence). These words, in turn, are representative of larger metrically marked classes of words used by Chaucer. The inflectional -e of most weak and/or plural adjectives and the inflectional -es of most plural nouns regularly count in Chaucer’s metre. I find only one exception among words that are closely phonologically similar to ‘longe’ or ‘lokkes’, in over 150 relevant instances. In its one occurrence in Chaucer’s poetry, the weak adjective ‘wrong’ scans as a monosyllable. However, this exception itself follows the sub-rule (not applicable to Adam Scriveyn 3 ‘long’) that the inflectional -e of weak adjectives drops out from metre before nouns with stress on the second syllable.

Monosyllabic forms of weak and/or plural adjectives like ‘longe’ and plural nouns like ‘lokkes’ were probably available in Chaucer’s language, but the conservatism of metrical tradition meant that they were rarely expressed in his metre. Medieval English poets could certainly employ more than one scansion of the same word at their discretion. Like his contemporaries and poetic heirs, Chaucer exploited many metrical doublets. However, the final -e of adjectives like ‘longe’ and the final -es of nouns like ‘lokkes’ were, for Chaucer, virtually non-negotiable. They form a regular component of his metrical phonology. Derek Pearsall has aptly called the sequence [weak monosyllabic adjective] + [inflectional -e] + [noun with stress on the first syllable] a ‘building block’ of Chaucer’s metrical line.

The demotion of monosyllabic ‘lokkes’ in Adam Scriveyn line 3, further distancing the word from its normative scansion (Sx), also seems un-Chaucerian. Metrical demotion of content words is rare in Chaucer’s verse. Much more common is the opposite feature, metrical promotion of function words, as in Canterbury Tales I.1 ‘Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote’ (SxSxSxSxSx).

Metrical evidence strengthens the case against Chaucerian authorship of Adam Scriveyn. The metrical phonology of the third line of the poem is uncharacteristic of Chaucer’s metrical practice in three respects: monosyllabic weak plural ‘long’, monosyllabic plural ‘lokkes’, and metrical demotion of ‘lokkes’. These features are more characteristic of the practice of Hoccleve, Lydgate, and other fifteenth-century pentameter poets, for whom the metrical value of a wider range of historical -es had become variable. In this connection it seems significant that, alongside pentameter, rhyme royal was one of Chaucer’s most recognizable formal inventions. Like the subject and attributed title of the poem, the metre and stanza form of Adam Scriveyn express the nascent cult of Chaucer in the early fifteenth century. Hence its inclusion in Shirley’s Chaucer- and Lydgate-themed anthology.
The evidence of metre cannot confirm or disconfirm Edwards’s theory of a scriptorium supervisor-poet. Nor can metre fix *Adam Scriveyn* in the fifteenth century, though that at least seems likely if Chaucer is not the author. My conclusion is negative: to judge from metrical phonology, Chaucer did not compose *Adam Scriveyn*.

Arguments from metrical style are no more dispositive than other arguments from internal evidence. *Adam Scriveyn* could be salvaged for the Chaucer corpus by the assumption of a coincidence of three rare metrical quirks, or by the conjecture of scribal error in the received text, e.g. ‘lokkes] long lokkes’, for disyllabic scansion of ‘lokkes’. Both considerations illustrate the delicate interplay between literary style and authorized corpus in the modern reconstruction of medieval literature. The interplay is particularly delicate in the case of poems surviving in only one manuscript. One wants to know what Chaucer was capable of writing, what the text of *Adam Scriveyn* ought to be, and who wrote it. In practice, these questions depend upon one another. Nevertheless, by checking a seven-line poem against the thousands of lines accepted without question as part of Chaucer’s poetic corpus, it is possible to minimize the circularity of any particular line of reasoning. Edwards notes the ‘cumulative weight’ of published arguments questioning whether Chaucer composed *Adam Scriveyn*.¹⁶ Metre, not heretofore considered as a category of evidence bearing on this question, adds further weight to the case against Chaucerian authorship.

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NOTES


Weak and/or pl. ‘longe’ in non-eliding contexts or without elision: Anelida and Arcite 333; Canterbury Tales I.354, 591, 1337 (rhymes weak pl. ‘stronge’), 2020 (scan ‘yscald’, for xSxSxxSxSxSx, or epic caesura: xSxSxxSxSxSx), 2136 (rhymes pl. ‘longe’), 2143, 2717, 2966, 3067 (forestress ‘conclude’, ‘serye’), 3438, 3682, 4175, and 4235, II.1080 (forestress ‘relief’), III.953 (before b- but without elision; probably wrenched stress in ‘under’), IV.1657, V.905, VI.347, VII.2110 (rhymes weak ‘stronge’), and VIII.519 and 1221; Complaint to his Lady 1 (epic caesura: xSxSxxSxSxSx, or read ‘night’ with some editions); House of Fame 542 (rhymes weak pl. ‘stronge’); Legend of Good Women F 180, G 50, 650, and 1154; Parliament of Fowls 21, 682, and 692; Romaunt of the Rose A 1384 (rhymes pl. ‘stronge’); and Troilus and Criseyde I.220, II.927 and 983, III.439, 1248, and 1388 (rhymes adv. ‘stronge’ <OE ‘r’ (relief) and pl. ‘wronge’), IV.43, and V.680 and 1671. Pl. ‘lokkes’: Canterbury Tales I.81, 677, 3374 (syncope ‘kembeth’), and 4369, and III.2182.

Weak and/or pl. ‘yonge’ in non-eliding contexts: Anelida and Arcite 38; Book of the Duchess 1095; Canterbury Tales I.7, 213, 664, 871, 972, 1011, 2598, 3233, 3273, and 4002, II.275, 447 (weak declension with vocative), 800, 975, and 1105, III.187 and 1725 (rhymes ‘ysonge’ <OE gesungen), IV.77, 210 (forestress Grisildis), 567, 777, 1081, and 1093, V.54, 385, 956, and 1119, VI.120 (disyllabic ‘maydens’), 464, 478, and 759, VII.28, 644, 684 (weak declension with vocative), 2166 (either headless, with elision ‘ne his’ and trochaic inversion ‘yonge’ or metrical promotion of ‘ne’ and disyllabic forestressed ‘felawes’, or else trochaic inversion Daniel, no elision ‘ne his’, and metrical promotion of ‘his’: a difficult line), and 2431 (epic caesura: xSxSxxSxSxSx, or no -e ‘sone’ <OE sumu), and IX.334 (rhymes ‘tonge’ <OE tunge); House of Fame 177 and 1233 (rhymes ‘tonge’); Legend of Good Women 724, 1138, 1196, 1216, 1657, 1698 (rhymes ‘tonge’), 1948, and 2297 (no -e 1st sg. ‘betake’); Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan 20 (rhymes ‘tonge’); Parliament of Fowls 278; Romaunt of the Rose A 23, 82, 1288, and 1298; and Troilus and Criseyde I.184, II.119, III.293 (rhymes ‘tonge’), and V.1835. Weak and/or pl. ‘longe’ in non-eliding contexts or without elision: Canterbury Tales I.1338 (rhymes weak pl. ‘longe’), 1653 (rhymes adv. ‘longe’ <OE lange), 2135 (rhymes pl. ‘longe’), 2373 (weak declension with vocative), 2409 (rhymes inf. ‘honge’), 2421 (rhymes pl. indicative ‘honge’, ‘hung’), 2638, 2644, and 2771 (rhymes adv. ‘longe’), II.635, IV.2367 (weak declension with vocative), VI.789 (rhymes inf. ‘honge’), and VII.2108 (rhymes weak ‘longe’) and 2726 (rhymes adv. ‘longe’); House of Fame 541 (rhymes weak pl. ‘longe’); Legend of Good Women F 161, 1454 (before E- but without elision), 1903 (rhymes adv. ‘longe’), and 2670 (rhymes adv. ‘longe’); Romaunt of the Rose A 1383 (rhymes pl. ‘longe’); and Troilus and Criseyde I.57 (rhymes adv. ‘longe’ and V.688 (rhymes inf. ‘longe’ and adv. ‘longe’), 864 (‘stronge’ modifies ‘papal’; rhymes adv. ‘longe’), 1201 (rhymes inf. ‘honge’ and adv. ‘longe’), 1454 (headless; metrical promotion of ‘Of’), and 1486 (af stress ‘Thebes’). Pl. ‘rokkes’: Book of the Duchess 156 (‘roches’); Canterbury Tales V.859, 868, 878, 891 (monosyllabic ‘alle’), 893, 993 (forestress ‘remove’), 996, 1064 (monosyllabic ‘hæs’ <OE hæs), 1158 (no -e ‘sighte’ <OE gesiht, one of a class of feminine nouns that acquired analogical -es in Early Middle English), 1221 (elision ‘Tore’), 1268 (no -e ‘Britaine’ <OF Breitaine + L Britannia), 1296 (monosyllabic ‘semed’), 1301, and 1338; House of Fame 1035 (‘roches’); Legend of Good Women 2193; and Troilus and


9Troilus and Criseyde I.692. Pl. ‘wronge’ scans as a disyllable in both of its appearances in Chaucer’s poetry: Troilus and Criseyde III.804 (rhymes adv. ‘longe’ <OE lange) and 1391 (rhymes pl. ‘longe’ and adv. ‘stronge’ <OE strange).

10Pearsall, ‘Weak declension’, p. 182. Troilus and Criseyde I.692 ‘wrong’ precedes ‘conseyte’, with aft stress. It may also be relevant that, unlike ‘long’, ‘strong’, or ‘yong’, ‘wrong’ descends from Old Norse (ranger), and that, unlike the other adjectives, ‘wrong’ in the sense in which Chaucer uses it at Troilus and Criseyde I.692 (‘mistaken’) dates only from the fourteenth century, during or after the presumptive loss of the inflectional -e of weak adjectives in English speech. See Middle English Dictionary (MED) Online, ‘wrong (adj.)’, 4, though I note also MED Online, ‘wrong(e’ (the adverb), e, attested from the late twelfth century.


13Pearsall, ‘Weak declension’, p. 179 and passim.

14An example is the showstopping inventory of trees at Canterbury Tales I.2921–3, where ‘firre’, ‘aspe’, ‘Wylugh’ (with elision before ‘elm’), ‘plane’, ‘box’, ‘bech’, and ‘ew’ (after elision with ‘hasel’) are all demoted. Other examples tend to include content words less contentful than ‘lokkes’, e.g. Troilus and Criseyde I.692 (‘wright’).
