

Chapter 5

RHYME AND REASON IN *THE BATTLE OF MALDON*

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Introduction

A defining moment in the history of English poetry is John Milton's Preface to his epic *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, where the poet justifies his choice of blank verse as a medium for long narrative poems, essentially, of course, because blank verse eschews rhyme, "the jingling sound of like endings."¹ For Milton, rhyme is "but the Invention of a barbarous Age to set off wretched matter and lame Meter"; it is "trivial and of no true musical delight; which consists only in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another" (lines 3–4, 10–11). Milton's strictures emphasize that there was a long pedigree for unrhymed verse, especially in the Classical tradition, and Milton presented his own poetry here as a return to this old tradition, a case of "ancient liberty recover'd to heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing" (15–16). In this chapter, we also return to a time of "ancient liberty," when English verse did not rhyme, when it was bound instead by other rules, namely those of metrical alliteration (rules which have been extrapolated by modern scholars from such poems as *Beowulf*, as the work of Alan Bliss, to whose memory this volume is dedicated, testifies).² For the Old English poets, rhyme—though known in Anglo-Latin hymnody and perhaps familiar, to some writers with international connections, in the poetry of Old High German or Old French—was merely an optional embellishment. In this discussion, at least initially, we will take rhyme to be "the articulatory-acoustic relation between stressed syllables that begin differently and end alike."³ However, it will be seen that this definition will necessarily have to be adjusted as we come to examine the rhyming practices in *The Battle of Maldon*.

Perhaps the first experiment in rhymed verse in English occurs in the (undated) oeuvre of the poet Cynewulf, in two passages in his *Elene* (1236–50) and *Christ II*

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1 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara Lewalski (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 10, line 12.

2 On the metricality of alliteration in English alliterative verse, see, for example, Edwin Duncan, "Weak Stress and Poetic Constraints in Old English Verse," *JEGP* 92.4 (1993): 495–508; Rafael J. Pascual, "Oral Tradition and the History of English Alliterative Verse," *SN* 89.2 (2017): 250–260; Mark Griffith, "Extra Alliteration on Stressed Syllables in Old English Poetry: Types, Uses and Evolution," *ASE* 47 (2018): 69–176.

3 This definition of rhyme is from William Harmon, "Rhyme in English Verse: History, Structures, Functions," *Studies in Philology* 84 (1987): 365–93 at 365.

(591–96).⁴ And the first consistent use of continual end-rhyme is *The Rhyming Poem*, an elegy found in the Exeter Book Anthology (compiled ca. 975), in which the two halves of the line are connected both by metrical alliteration (here in bold) on the major lifts and also by this new device of rhyme (underlined) on the end-word of the on-verse and the off-verse:

Me lifes on**l**ah se þis leoht onw**ra**h
[He who revealed this light gave me life]⁵

In the eleventh century some occasional poems in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle abandon alliteration and adopt this new form of English verse: notably *The Death of the Ætheling Alfred* (ca. 1035) and *The Rime of King William* (ca. 1087). It would be interesting to pursue such new developments further, but this chapter does not seek to investigate the origins or the history of rhyme in Old English verse.⁶ Instead it will focus on the pattern of rhymes in one slightly earlier occasional piece, *The Battle of Maldon*, a poem which commemorates the historic fight with the Vikings in August of the year 991 at Maldon in Essex. The text itself was probably composed soon after the event, probably in the late tenth century (though some argue for early eleventh-century composition).⁷ But as a poem in late Old English, *Maldon* mostly still conforms to the rules of traditional alliterative verse, on the model of *Beowulf* and, say, the Chronicle poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* (ca. 937).⁸ Nevertheless, there are departures and anomalies, including assonance and other sound-effects, discussed recently by Richard Dance.⁹ The investigation can go further, however, for another notable feature is the occurrence of end-rhyme, often in the form of morphological rhymes and partial rhymes; as will be seen, these occur far more frequently in *Maldon* than they do in poems such as *The Wanderer*, which only makes sporadic use of such devices. It must be admitted that morphological rhymes

⁴ Harriet Soper, “The Light in the Old English Rhyming Poem, lines 1–2,” *N&Q*, 66.1 (2019): 20–24.

⁵ *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 90–91, line 1. *Maldon* translations here and below are the author’s.

⁶ See the investigations of Michael McKie, “The Origins and Early Development of Rhyme in English Verse,” *The Modern Language Review* 92.4 (October, 1997): 817–31; Mikhail L. Gasparov, *A History of European Versification*, trans. G. S. Smith, Leofranc Holford-Strevens, and M. Tarlinskaja (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁷ For a recent study, see Mark Atherton, *The Battle of Maldon: War and Peace in Tenth-Century England* (London: Bloomsbury 2020).

⁸ Thus, *Maldon* complies with the four-position rule, which is the most fundamental principle of classical Old English verse construction. See, for example, R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), §208; Rafael J. Pascual, “Three-position Verses and the Metrical Practice of the *Beowulf* Poet,” *Selima: Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature* 20 (2013–2014): 49–79.

⁹ For this recent and very useful look at effects of assonance and internal rhyme and other sound effects in the poem, see Richard Dance, “‘þær wearð hream ahafen’: A Note on Old English Spelling and the Sound of *The Battle of Maldon*,” in Hugh Magennis and Jonathan Wilcox, ed., *The Power of Words: Anglo-Saxon Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg on his Seventieth Birthday* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 278–317.

can occur “by chance” when a poet uses, say, a sequence of three infinitives in *-an* in his or her sentence structure. But if there is also a cluster of other endings in *-an* (e.g. on adjectives) in the same sequence of lines, occurring at metrically weighty places within the line, then the device begins to look “deliberate.” In the following discussion, I will present some close readings of key passages in *Maldon* in which the phenomenon of rhyme plays a prominent role, thematically and/or metrically.¹⁰

Types of Rhyme in *Maldon*

It will be appropriate first to begin with definitions and classifications before we interpret the details of actual use.¹¹ Two basic distinctions can be made between (1) the quality of the rhyme (is it full or partial?) and (2) the position of the rhyme within the poetic line (i.e. is it end-rhyme or internal rhyme?). Our first example comes from *Maldon*, and describes what happens at the start of the battle when the “bows become busy” (line 110a).¹² Here we find a rare full rhyme, sometimes called “perfect rhyme” (the critical terminology is variable); it occurs internally, that is to say, within the confines of the verse or half-line (*Maldon*, 110b):

(1) bord ord onfeng
[board received point]

The effect achieved here is of a full “masculine” rhyme falling on two stressed syllables, and its meaning is iconic: the *bord*, the four-letter word for a “shield,” literally contains, encompasses, and receives the shorter three-letter *ord*, the word for a “point,” that is, in this context, the “arrowhead” (in other passages it often means “spear”).¹³ The effect is to highlight and emphasize the action of the warrior in defending himself, and the poet was perhaps influenced by occasional use of this technique in *Beowulf*, for example line 2609b, “hond rond gefeng” (hand grasped shield).¹⁴ A similar example may be “ord in

10 I would like to thank Rafael Pascual for his invaluable assistance with references and for his useful comments and suggestions in the writing of this chapter.

11 More generally, for a detailed discussion of taxonomy and terminology, see the article “Rhyme” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) [accessed September 16, 2020].

12 Quotations from the poem are based on *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. D. G. Scragg (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981). Other standard editions are: *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. E. V. Gordon (London: Methuen, 1937); *The Battle of Maldon: Text and Translation*, ed. Bill Griffiths (Pinner: Anglo-Saxon, 1993); *Eight Old English Poems*, John C. Pope, 3rd ed., rev. by R. D. Fulk (New York: Norton, 2001). We are reliably informed that Dr Mark Griffith is working on a new critical edition.

13 There is an interesting parallel in Jakobson’s discussion of the rhyme “I like Ike,” the slogan used during the presidential election campaign of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1951. See Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 70.

14 For discussion of this verse, and for the possible influence of *Beowulf* on *Maldon*, see Atherton, *Battle of Maldon*, 128–34. *Beowulf* quotation here adapted from Klaeber 4.

gewod" (*Maldon*, 157a), where the *ord* and *-wod* are connected by half-rhyme; again this is an example of internal rhyme, used in conjunction with the alliterative metre to add further embellishment and rhetorical effect. A possible development of this kind of internal rhyme is the rhyme of *gehealdan* (167a) and *wealdon* (168a) which links two separate lines together, rather like the device of extending the alliterating sound over two or more lines in order to create an effect of connection and continuity.

A further example of rhyme in *Maldon* serves a rather different function; this is the pairing of *stunde* and *wunde*—so-called feminine rhymes—as a full rhyme marking the end of each verse;¹⁵ this is the scene describing the actions of the Northumbrian hostage, who as it happens is also a bowman (line 271):

(2) æfre embe stunde he sealde sume wunde

[repeatedly he dealt out wounds]

Here, the metre momentarily shifts from the rule-bound alliterative metre into a trochaic rhyming couplet in which the tonic syllable in each verse falls on the verse-final stressed word.¹⁶ Eleven lines later, the poet uses the same device again; the two verses of the line are connected not by alliterating lifts but by end-rhyme (line 282):

(3) Sibyrhtes broðor and swiðe mænig oþer

[Sibyrht's brother and many another]

Here rhyme has a metrical function and is a foretaste of what is to come: this is the metre of the later poems *The Death of the Ætheling Alfred* (*DAIf*) and *The Rime of King William*, in which alliterative metre is mostly abandoned and replaced by end-rhyme.

As a basis for comparison, it is worth considering the rhymes in a long passage from *The Death of Alfred* (*DAIf*), here given in the version of the text from manuscript C of

15 In a line of verse, a masculine ending means that the line ends in a stressed syllable, whereas a feminine ending refers to a final unstressed syllable; when masculine endings have the same vowel-consonant sound these are known as masculine rhymes for example, *break/take*, while feminine rhymes will chime on both the stressed penultimate syllable and the final unstressed syllable, for example, *spoken/broken* or *pleasure/treasure*.

16 This line is very similar to Lawman's *Brut*, 250a. See for example Bredehoft, *Early English Metre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 113. This verse thus seems to anticipate Early Middle English metre of the *Brut* type. On the connection of Lawman to the alliterative tradition, see, for example, Pascual, "Oral Tradition." The following is a definition of tonic syllable from the glossary of a standard textbook: "A tonic syllable is one which carries a tone, i.e. has a noticeable degree of prominence. In theories of intonation where only one tone may occur in a tone-unit, the tonic syllable therefore is the point of strongest stress" (Peter Roach, *Glossary—A Little Encyclopaedia of Phonetics* (2011); "experiments have shown that prominence is associated with greater length, greater loudness, pitch prominence (i.e. having a pitch level or movement that makes a syllable stand out from its context) and with 'full' vowels and diphthongs (whereas the vowels ə 'schwa', i, u and syllabic consonants are only found in unstressed syllables)" (Peter Roach, *A Little Encyclopedia of Phonetics* (2002), 63).

the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 1036.¹⁷ The first half of the poem blames Earl Godwine for Alfred's arrest and death in custody, and catalogues the terrible treatment meted out to Alfred's men (I have added modern punctuation; rhyming words are underlined):

Ac Godwine hine þa gelette 7 hine on hæft sette,
 7 his geferan he todræf 7 sume mislice ofsloh:
 sume hi man wið feo sealde, sume hreowlice acwealde,
 sume hi man bende, sume hi man blende,
 sume hamelode, sume hættode. 5
 Ne wearð dreorlicre dæd gedon on þison earde
 syþþan Dene comon 7 her frið namon.
 Nu is to gelyfenne to ðan leofan Gode
 þæt he blission bliðe mid Criste
 be wæron butan scylde swa earmlice acwealde. 10

[But Godwine hindered him and put him in captivity, / his companions he drove out and
some he killed in various ways. / Some he sold for money and some cruelly murdered,
/ some of them were put in bonds and some blinded, / some were lamed and some
mistreated. / Never was a more despicable action carried out in this country / since the
time when the Danes came and made a truce here. / Now we must trust in the dear God
/ that they are happy and joyful in Christ / who without any guilt were so grievously
murdered.]

Here various observations may be made that are relevant to our study of *Maldon*. The full rhymes in *DAIf* are (with one exception in the second half of the poem, not quoted above) all *feminine* rhymes on the pattern *stunde/wunde*, as found in examples (2) and (3) from *Maldon*. In the ten lines from *DAIf* cited here, the opening sentence has three perfect rhymes of this type, as in *gelette/sette*, *sealde/acwealde*, *bende/blende*, and this sets the pattern early on, from which the poet then feels free to depart. Such poetic licence involves replacing what should be a full rhyme with some kind of alternative parallelism. One solution is line 2, where two prefixed verbs in the preterite tense, *todraf* and *ofsloh*, form a kind of “morphological rhyme” on the same structural pattern. Another variant is to use what for us (who are used to rhymed poetry) is a half-rhyme or partial rhyme, as in *namon/comon* (line 7), or *scylde/acwealde* (line 10), where the medial vowel of the stressed syllable differs, or even the rhythmically similar, apparently trisyllabic *ham(e) lode/hættode* (line 5). However, some of the partial rhymes used in the poem are so weak or “imperfect” that they are hardly recognizable to us as rhymes. Lines 6, 8, and 9 are interesting in this respect: the poet resorts to traditional alliterative metre here,

¹⁷ The standard edition is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Volume 5, Manuscript C*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001). I also consulted the manuscript, London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. I, available online at www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_i_f156r [accessed September 19, 2020].

presumably because his rhymes at the end of each verse are weak, but nevertheless there is reason to believe that they are still regarded as rhymes of a kind. A modern reader of Old English may miss the rhyme in line 6, *dæd/earde*, but it is well to recall the consensus in Old English phonology that the diphthong *ea* in *eard* (and similar words) was pronounced with a vowel rather similar to an /æ/ phoneme followed by a schwa.¹⁸ And does *gelyfenne* actually rhyme with the final word of the following verse? It might be argued that there are phonetic similarities between *gelyfenne* and *leofan Gode* and also even between *blission* and *Criste*.

The radical nature of the switch to end-rhyme that finds expression in the Cynewulf passages, *The Rhyming Poem* and *The Death of the Ætheling Alfred*, is highlighted if we now glance at instances of rhyme in a poem much more firmly located within the traditional Old English poetic canon, namely *The Wanderer*. If we turn to this text and begin reading, we will be hard pressed at first sight to find any examples of conscious and deliberate rhyme—of any type, be they full or partial, end-rhyme or internal rhyme. As we read, it becomes clear that this poet is only sporadically interested in the extra embellishment that we call rhyme. The first 14 lines contain no obvious examples, which contrasts strikingly with the first 14 lines of *Maldon*, as we shall see. In *The Wanderer*, the first likely example we discover is at 15b, with the infinitive clause “wyrde wiðstondan,” which forms a half-rhyme with the ensuing 16b “helpe gefremman.”¹⁹ In and of itself *wiðstondan* and *gefremman* would be a poor example of a rhyme, but the added parallelism of *wyrde* and *helpe*, two nouns of feminine gender in the oblique case in *-e*, points to a deliberate use of rhythm and sound. A similar case of parallelism—in this instance on the pattern dative noun + past participle—may be found later in *The Wanderer* at 77a with “*hrime behrorene*” (covered with ice). Two lines further on, a chiming and rhyming effect is achieved at verse 79a with “*dreame bedrorene*” (deprived of joy); this is highlighted by the full compound rhyme *bedrorene/behrorene*. The two rhymes create a miniature envelope pattern, within which there is an image of ruin and loss appropriate to this context of a devastated city. Here clearly the poet of *The Wanderer* used a polysyllabic rhyme for a pointed rhetorical effect. But there are very few other instances of obvious rhyme in this poem of 115 lines; I would note the following four possible examples: the parallelism of the partially rhymed *geondhweorfeð* and *geondsceawað* (51b and 52b); an internal morphological rhyme on the endings of *dreoseð* and *fealleð* (63b); a sequence of four lines each ending—yet again—with a third-person present tense inflection in *-eð* (101–4); and similarly, a “rhyming couplet,” *seceð* (114b) and *stondeð* (115b), which brings the poem to a close. As we will see shortly, the examples in *Maldon* are far more varied, and far more numerous.

¹⁸ On the pronunciation of <ea> see for instance Randolph Quirk and C. L. Wrenn, *An Old English Grammar* (London: Methuen, 1957), 14, 149.

¹⁹ See *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

Finding a rhyme was apparently a difficult task in Old English, and the poets often employed alternatives in their actual poetic practice. Examples (1)–(3) are in fact quite rare occurrences in *The Battle of Maldon*, for there is only a limited number of perfect rhymes in the poem. Most of the other rhymes are decidedly not of this kind. In terms of position what we find is end-rhyme: we see a series of verses each ending with the same grammatical inflection, as we have just noted in *The Wanderer*; but in terms of quality what we usually observe is a partial rhyme or half-rhyme similar to the “alternative devices” noted earlier in *Dalif*. Moreover, as critics have pointed out, there are many instances of assonance (repeated vowels) and consonance (repeated consonants) and other effects of sound and repetition within the texture of the poem. The *Maldon* poet seems to be predisposed to use such poetic devices.

Metrically, it is in word-final position at the end of a verse that rhyme (whether full or partial) becomes significant, because the rhyme then serves as a metrical structuring device, as in rhyming couplets. And notably, it is the partial, “half-,” “weak,” or “imperfect” form of end-rhyme that the poet of *Maldon* tends to favour. In these relatively numerous instances the main metrical principle of the passage is still alliterative poetry, but the final word of each verse—or in some instances the final word of each line—ends in the same unstressed syllable. This kind of effect requires long passages to illustrate effectively (and this is what we will aim to show in the next section of this chapter). But for convenience now, and in order to illustrate the point, here are two examples. About half way through the poem, Ælfwine, the young Mercian nobleman and kinsman of Byrhtnoth, ends his long speech of encouragement and hastens forward in order to pursue the feud and avenge his lord and friend (lines 225–30); the main rhyming effects are marked with underlining (for simplicity’s sake, some other devices such as assonance or consonance are not systematically highlighted):

- (4) Þa he forð eode, fæhðe gemunde 225
 þæt he mid orde anne geræhte
 flotan on þam folce, þæt se on foldan læg
 forwegen mid his wæpne. Ogan þa winas manian,
 frynd and geferan, þæt hi forð eodon.

[Then he went forward—directing his mind to the feud,
 so that with his spear he wounded
 a seaman in the crowd, who lay there on the earth,
 killed by his weapon. He urged his fellows,
 friends and companions that they move forward.]²⁰

Essentially this type of rhyme is a form of *homeoteleuton*, which the OED defines as “a rhetorical figure consisting in the use of a series of words with the same or similar

20 Translation from Atherton, *Battle of Maldon*, 185.

endings.”²¹ In another example from the beginning of the text, we may observe a conscious employment of this partial rhyme on the unstressed infinitive ending *-an* in three successive verses (lines 2–3):

(5) Het þa hyssa hwæne hors forlætan,
feor afysan, and forð gangan

[Then he commanded each of his men to release their horses,
drive them far away, and go forth]²²

An even weaker variant of this partial type is scarcely a rhyme, more a repeated chiming on the final unstressed syllable at the end of the line, as in lines 14–16, where we hear three past tense endings, each consisting of the dental consonant + final *-e* (*-te* or *-de*) at the end of three consecutive lines:

(6) þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte
bord and bradswurd; beot he gelæste
þa he ætforan his frean feohtan sceolde

[for as long as he could hold in his hands
shield and broad sword; he fulfilled his vow
that he would fight in the forefront, in the presence of his lord and leader]²³

In short then, as well as infinitives or other words with inflectional endings in *-an*, and/or datives in *-um*, or occasional comparatives in *-re*, it is weak preterite tenses (singulars in *-de*, *-te*; plurals in *-don*) and similar-sounding “half-rhymes” that attract the Maldon poet, and he places them in consecutive chains of verses each ending with a word with the same inflectional ending. As will be seen below, as I present and examine a few select longer passages from the poem, these sequences of weak or “imperfect” end-rhyme or, to put it differently, these chains of homeoteleuton, are very common in *Maldon*, and they contrast strikingly with the situation in *The Wanderer*, or indeed in *Beowulf*. I will argue that they serve first the *structural* purpose of highlighting significant passages or verse paragraphs, and secondly also the *metrical* function of marking the end of a verse or the end of a poetic line.

Select Passages from the Poem with Commentary, Illustrating the Poet’s Use of Rhyme and Half-rhyme

The text here is edited from Casley’s transcript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford (the nearest we can come to the original medieval manuscript), in consultation also with the main critical editions. The division into sections follows the pattern in Casley’s transcript

²¹ Sense I of “homoeoteleuton,” *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* [accessed September 16, 2020].

²² Translation from Atherton, *Battle of Maldon*, 174.

²³ Translation from Atherton, *Battle of Maldon*, 174.

of large upper case initials which appear to signal the start of new “verse-paragraphs.”²⁴ For a translation, not printed here for want of space, the most appropriate to consult would be a literal rendering in prose that stays close to the lineation of the original.²⁵

Arriving at the Battlefield (*Maldon*, 2–16)

Het þa hyssa hwæne	hors forlætan,	
feor afysan,	and forð gangan,	
hicgan to handum	and to hige godum.	
þa þæt Offan mæg	ærest onfunde	5
þæt se eorl nolde	yrhðo gepolian,	
he let him þa of handon	leofne fleogan	
hafoc wið þæs holtes,	and to þære hilde stop;	
be þam man mihte oncnawan	þæt se cniht nolde	
wacian æt þam wige,	þa he to wæpnum feng.	10
Eac him wolde Eadric	his ealdre gelæstan,	
frecan to gefeohte,	ongan þa forð beran	
gar to gupe.	He hæfde god gepanc	
þa hwile þe he mid handum	healdan mihte	
bord and bradswurd;	beot he gelæste	15
þa he ætforan his frean	feohtan sceolde.	

The above passage may be compared profitably with the first sixteen lines of *The Wanderer* (discussed above), in which only the two final words of lines 15 and 16 might be construed as being linked by half-rhyme on the *-an* suffix. In the passage from *Maldon*, by contrast, eight verses end in this suffix, mostly grouped together at lines 2–3, 6–7, and 11–12. The difference, I think, is significant, for—as demonstrated above—the poet of *The Wanderer* makes only sporadic use of rhyme. This figure may be increased to twelve examples if we also group with them the similar-sounding (vowel + nasal) suffixes *-um* and *-on* that also occur in verse-final position, as in lines 3 and 7:

hicgan to handum and to hige godum (line 3)
 he let him þa of handon leofne fleogan (line 7)

It will be noticed in the above two lines that the dative plural of *hand* is spelled differently in each instance, and at line 14a we find again the *-um* ending in “mid handum”; this variation also affects the dative plural of the poetic noun for “hand,” as in “mid folman” (21a) and “of folman” (108a), as also that of the noun *word* in “wordum mælde” (26b), “hyra winemagas wordon bædon” (306). Historical phonology offers a reason for these

²⁴ For the text divided into sections according to the upper-case letters of the Casley transcript, see the edition by Bill Griffiths, and the text and translation in Appendix I of Atherton, *Battle of Maldon*, 173–90.

²⁵ See my own literal, line-by-line translation in Atherton, *Battle of Maldon*, 173–78. There are other suitable literal translations in Griffiths’s edition and S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Dent, 1982).

kinds of spelling variation: late Old English vowels in unstressed endings *-an*, *-en*, *-on*, *-um* were becoming reduced in pronunciation to schwa + *-n*.²⁶ Since Old English orthography had undergone standardization by the late tenth century, the evidence for this weakening of unstressed vowels in late Old English spelling is occasional or sporadic, although it starts to become more common in early Middle English. The following is an example from an eleventh-century “Sunday Letter” homily, where the older and newer spellings of the dative plural are seen side-by-side in the spellings *fotum* and *handon* (emphases added):²⁷

And þa cildra þe beoð begiten on sunnan niht and on þam halgan freolsnihtum hi sceolan beon geborene butan eagon and butan fotum and butan handon and eacswilce dumbe, for þam þe ge ne heoldon mid clænnesse þa halgan niht and ne wiðtugan mid eowre tungan to cursiende.

[And those children who are begotten in the night between Saturday and Sunday and in the nights before holy feast-days will be born without eyes and without feet and without hands and likewise dumb, because you did not observe these holy nights with purity and you did not refrain from cursing with your tongues.]

If, as seems therefore likely, *handon* and *handum* sounded like **handan* (“hand’n”) then it makes sense to list words ending in vowel + nasal, that is to say, *-on* or *-um*, as part of the same series of “half-rhymes” or homeoteleuton in our opening passage from *Maldon*. To put it differently, I would count three rhymes in line 3:

hicgan to handum and to hige godum

where in earlier Old English there were probably just two.

Another series in the same passage consists of words ending in the dental + *-e*, essentially the preterite ending, also occurring in verse-final position, and once again in clusters (at lines 5b, 6a, 9b, 14b, 15b, and 16b). All this suggests that our poet liked to have his verses chiming on their final syllables as a way of underlining the verses, the metrical units of his poem. Then, in addition, the poet adds a few further half-rhymes *within* the verse or *within* the long line. Here the pattern seems to place the device on the lifts, especially on the first lift of the line. There is an example at line 10 in our passage; here I give the whole sentence (lines 9–10) to see how the “-an” half-rhyme functions in context:

be þam man mihte oncnawan þæt se cniht nolde
wacian æt þam wige, þa he to wæpnum feng

The three “half-rhymes” in the above two lines occur on words that are significant lifts in the alliterative metrical structure. As in line 10, so line 12 also begins with a rhyming lift:

frean to gefeohte, ongan þa forð beran

²⁶ Donka Minkova, *A Historical Phonology of English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 180–83.

²⁷ For the text see Robert Priebsch, “The Chief Sources of Some Anglo-Saxon Homilies,” *Otia Merseiana* 1 (1899): 129–47.

In this case the rhyme on *frea*n, the first lift of 12a, links back to the previous word, the fourth lift of the previous line, i.e. *gelæsta*n, but also anticipates the fourth and final lift of its own line, *bera*n, with which it rhymes quite closely, particularly if the metathesis of the “r” is considered to be part of the overall sound (in addition, *bera*n, the first word of 12a, also chimes with the unstressed verb *onga*n, the initial word of 12b). Finally the rhymes form thick clusters in the final sentence of this section (lines 13b–16):

	He hæfde god geþanc	
þa hwile þe he mid	<u>handum healdan</u> mihte	
<u>bord</u> and brad <u>swurd</u> ;	beot he gelæste	15
þa he ætforan his frean	feohtan sceolde.	

Where the homeoteleuton of the preterite endings of the weak verbs *mihte*, *gelæste*, and *sceolde* serve the metrical function of marking aurally the ends of the lines, the other rhymes are stronger, almost “perfect” rhymes and occur in adjacent lifts or adjacent words. The sound of *handum* and *healdan* (14)—given what we have noted about the weakening of *-um* in unstressed syllables—practically constitutes a full rhyme,²⁸ as does the phrase “bord and bradswurd” (15a). Strikingly, all four lifts in line 16 that end this paragraph are further marked by homeoteleuton.

Byrhtnoth Makes His Preparations (Maldon, 17–24)

Ða þær Byrhtnoð ongan	beornas trymjan,	
rad and rædde,	ringum tæhte	
hu hi sceoldon standan	and þone stede healdan,	
and bæd þæt hyra randan	rihte heoldon	20
fæste mid folman,	and ne forhtedon na.	
þa he hæfde þæt folc	fægere getrymmed,	
he lihte þa mid leodon	þær him leofost wæs,	
þær he his heorðwerod	holdost wiste.	

The homeoteleuton of the ending *-an* dominates, occurring eleven times over six of the eight lines of this passage. The *standan/healdan/randan* sequence is particularly strong, although there is a problem with the form *randan* (though it has the authority of Casley’s manuscript) in that the usual plural of the strong noun *rand* would be *randas*. But the pattern of end-rhyme on the inflection *-an* is undeniable. If the Old English conjunction *and* contained a reduced vowel as it does when unstressed in Present-day English in such phrases as *fish and chips* (“fish’n chips”) or *cheese and wine* (“cheese’n wine”), then line 18 probably sounded as follows:

Rad’n rædde, ring’n tæhte

²⁸ It is probably fair to say that the pronunciation of *handum* and *healdan* with final-syllable schwa would make the rhyme more noticeable, since the older pronunciation with a fuller vowel would serve to differentiate the endings *-um* and *-an*.

which would render the assonance and half-rhymes clearer and more prominent. It might be thought that the last sentence of this verse paragraph allows the homeoteleuton to fall away, if it were not for the two superlatives in penultimate position in each line, both followed by similar-sounding preterite verbs linked by “w” and “s” consonance. In brief, the texture of this paragraph is densely patterned with these features of half-rhyme and homeoteleuton.

The Viking Messenger (*Maldon*, 25–41)

Pa stod on stæðe, stiðlice clypode	25
wicinga ar, wordum mælde,	
se on beot ahead brimliþendra	
æraende to þam eorle, þær he on ofre stod:	
“Me sendon to þe sæmen snelle,	
heton ðe secgan þæt þu most sendan raðe	30
beagas wið gebeorge; and eow betere is	
þæt ge þisne garræs mid gafole forgyldon,	
þon we swa hearde hilde dælon.	
Ne þurfe we us spillan, gif ge spedap to þam;	
we willað wið þam golde grið fæstnian.	35
Gyf þu þat gerædest, þe her ricost eart,	
þæt þu þine leoda lysan wille,	
syllan sæmannum on hyra sylfra dom	
feoh wið freode, and niman frið æt us,	
we willap mid þam sceattum us to scype gangan,	40
on flot feran, and eow fripes healdan.”	

This verse paragraph of 17 lines has fewer examples than the previous one of the chains of half-rhyme that I am arguing are typical of this poet. It is an unusual moment in the poem, the only time when we hear the voice of one of the Viking raiders, and Fred Robinson has argued in a famous article that it is the first attempt in English literature to render a foreign accent through the medium of English.²⁹ Arguably in terms of our topic—the poet’s use of half-rhyme and homeoteleuton—this passage proceeds in waves: it begins with a passage of narrative introducing the speaker in which three verses are linked by half-rhyme on the preterite ending of the final syllable; as the Viking messenger begins speaking there appear a number of emphatic internal rhymes; the *-an* endings begin to gather towards the end of his speech, which then closes on four instances of end-rhyme in *-an*.

This closing pattern in *-an* raises issues about the metrical analysis of line 40, which in Pope’s edition *Eight Old English Poems* is given as follows:

we willap mid þam sceattum us to scype gangan,

²⁹ Fred C. Robinson, “Some Aspects of the *Maldon* Poet’s Artistry,” *JEGP* 75 (1976): 25–40.

with the caesura appearing after the personal pronoun *us*, whereas Scragg's edition opts for:

we willap mid þam sceattum us to scype gangan.

On purely semantic grounds, and for the subjective reasons of *Sprachgefühl*, I personally prefer Scragg's text on this point. But Pope's solution follows the rule (or perhaps better the observation) known as Kuhn's First Law, which Mary Eva Blockley sums up as follows:

His First Law, the Law of Sentence Particles, observes that proclitics do not need to count for metrical stress if they appear later in the clause than after the first alliterating word, but that any particles in a clause must count for metrical stress, unless they appear in a group either before or after the first alliterating word.³⁰

This rule justifies Pope's placing of the *us* as a particle in the on-verse of the line, because if it were in the off-verse it would become the alliterating lift rather than "*scipe*", which is in fact the predominant third lift of the line. Interestingly, the authors of the recent edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* make the following remark:

Very likely the positional regulation, at least, pertains to the requirements of alliteration, and grouping such particles at the start of the clause reduces the risk of being required to lend alliterative precedence to such words later in the clause, where they ought to be subordinated to the full stressed words like nouns and adjectives that are found there.³¹

In line 40 of *Maldon*, according to Scragg's editing of the line, we have a particle *us* in the off-verse where it should by the rule attract "alliterative precedence." But the point is that in normal prose (as opposed to poetry), and presumably also in everyday speech, the *us* pronoun is an ethical dative that would normally remain unstressed. In Modern English, for example, there is a popular song from the 1960s called "I'm gonna buy me a dog," in which the *me* remains unstressed. In modern German, to take a cognate language, it is possible to say:

Wir werden uns am Samstag mit Bahn und Bus durchschlagen

[We will struggle through and get there on Saturday by train and bus]

and again the personal pronoun *uns* will remain unstressed. By analogy it would seem likely that the *us* of "we willap mid þam sceattum us to scype gangan" should be unstressed. My argument about rhyme adds further support to these arguments by analogy. Given the metrical use of rhyme as a way of marking the verses, of setting up patterns of parallel half-rhymes, often very similar to rhyming couplets, it looks like

³⁰ Mary Eva Blockley, *Aspects of Old English Poetic Syntax* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 88. For more on Kuhn's First Law, see Jun Terasawa, *Old English Metre: An Introduction* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011), 92–102, and the references there.

³¹ *Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), cxviii4.

sceattum and *gangan* must necessarily be located in verse-final-position in order to preserve the pattern, hence the line should read:

we willaþ mid þam *sceattum* us to scype *gangan*.

This gives line 40 a similar structure to line 56 in Byrhtnoth's angry reply, when he throws back the messenger's words as it were into his face, rejecting his offer of peace at a price.

Byrhtnoth's Reply to the Messenger (*Maldon*, 41–61)

Byrhtnoð mapelode, bord hafenode,
wand wacne æsc, wordum mælde,
yrre and anræd ageaf him andsware:
"Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð? 45
Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,
ættrynne ord and ealde swurd,
þa heregeatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah.
Brimmanna boda, abeod eft ongean,
sege þinum leodum miccle laþre spell, 50
þæt her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
þe wile gealgean eþel þysne,
Æþelredes eard, ealdres mines,
folc and foldan. Feallan sceolon
hæþene æt hilde. To heanlic me þinceð 55
þæt ge mid urum sceattum to scype gangon
unbeoftene, nu ge þus feor hider
on urne eard in becomon.
Ne sceole ge swa softe sinc gegangan:
us sceal ord and ecg ær geseman, 60
grim guðplega, ær we gofol syllon."

Byrhtnoth's reply begins with a heavy use of rhyme in the introductory transition to his speech but then the rhyming words fade away. Mid-speech, some occasional rhymes give heavy rhetorical emphasis to significant points in his message, line 47 ("ættrynne *ord*/and ealde *swurd*") being the classic example, echoing a rhyme earlier in the poem of *bord* and *swurd* (15a) and anticipating a frequent rhyming collocation in this poem, heard in "bord ord gefeng" (110b), "stod/ætterne ord" (145–46), "ord in gewod" (157a) and "on orde stod" (273a). The rhymes return in the final part of the speech, located mostly at the end of the line. In short, this verse paragraph uses homeoteleuton mostly at line-end position, and there are considerably fewer instances of it than in previous verse paragraphs.

The Tide Comes In (*Maldon*, 62–67)

Het þa bord beran, beornas gangan,
þæt hi on þam easteðe ealle stodon.
Ne mihte þær for wætere werod þam oðrum;

þær com flowende flod æfter ebban, 65
lucon lagustreamas. To lang hit him þuhte,
hwænne hi togædere garas beron.

The pattern set up at the end of Byrhtnoth's speech, of *-an* half-rhymes in line-end position, now continues in this passage of narrative. Patterns of assonance on the sound of the vowel "o" are worthy of note in lines 63–65, though any discussion of them would fall out of the remit of this essay.

The Armies Line Up On the Opposing Banks of the River Channel (Maldon, 68-71)

Hi þær Pantan stream mid prasse bestodon,
Eastseaxena ord and se æschere.
Ne mihte hyra ænig oþrum derian, 70
buton hwa þurh flanes flyht fyl gename.

The Tide Goes Out (Maldon, 72–73)

Se flod ut gewat; þa flotan stodon gearowe,
wicinga fela, wiges georne.

These two very short verse paragraphs do not evince much evidence of metrical use of rhyme or half-rhyme, but the “o” assonance continues from before, and there is further repetition of the stem *stod* meaning “stood”. The passage ends on a faint half-rhyme pattern on *gearowe* and *georne*.

Wulfstan Holds the Bridge (*Maldon*, 74–88)

Het þa hæleða hleo	healdan þa bricge	
wigan wigheardne,	se wæs haten Wulfstan,	75
cafe mid his cynne,	þæt wæs Ceolan sunu,	
þe ðone forman man	mid his francan ofsceat	
þe þær baldlicost	on þa bricge stop.	
þær stodon mid Wulfstane	wigan unforhte,	
Ælfere and Maccus,	modige twegen,	80
þa noldon æt þam forða	fleam gewyrcan,	
ac hi fæstlice	wið ða fynd weredon,	
þa hwile þe hi wæpna	wealdan moston.	
Þa hi þæt ongeaton	and georne gesawon	
þæt hi þær bricgeweardas	bitere fundon,	85
ongunnon lytegian	þa laðe gystas,	
bædon þæt hi upgang	agan moston,	
ofer bone ford faran,	feban lædan.	

Wulfstan's bravery is narrated here with various examples of internal rhyme or half-rhyme falling on the ends of the heavier words. As Ælfere and Maccus join the fray

the style switches mostly to end-rhyme, supported also by internal rhyme, so that the repeated *-an* endings occur two or three times per line in the second half of this passage, and the final three words of the passage hammer this point home, to good effect.

Byrhtnoth in His Pride Allows the Vikings to Cross the Bridge (*Maldon*, 89–95)

Da se eorl ongan	for his ofermode	
alyfan landes to fela	lapere ðeode.	90
Ongan ceallian þa	ofer cald wæter	
Byrhtelmes bearn,	beornas gehlyston:	
'Nu eow is gerymed,	gað ricene to us,	
guman to guþe;	God ana wat	
hwa þære wælstowe	wealdan mote.'	95

A Comment on *Ofermod*, and Some Conclusions

It seems appropriate to end this chapter with a brief consideration of the famous *ofermod* passage that has become so crucial to interpretations of the poem. There are not in fact many metrical uses of half-rhyme in this short verse paragraph other than perhaps “ongan” (89a), echoed internally in “landes” (90a) and “ongan ceallian” (91a). Line 91 is of interest otherwise for the assonance of *a* and *æ* vowels, which seems to be reiterated by the poet in line 95. But let us turn to the crux, to *ofermod*. In a study of rhyme, it makes sense to consider the word *ofermode* (the dative form of the word as it appears in the poem) from the point of view of its sound and texture. In fact the full verse “for his ofermode” (89b), meaning “because of his pride”, forms a half-rhyme with the phrase “lapere ðeode” (to the hostile nation, 90b). This half-rhyme effect perhaps suggests ever so faintly—since rhyming words can imply semantic connections and contrasts—a counter message to the apparent criticism of the East Saxon ealdorman for his excess of hubris which many critics see in this section of the poem, for just as, earlier in the poem, it was appropriate for Byrhtnoth to counter the Viking messenger’s “boastful offer” with an “angry and resolute” response, so now it is appropriate to treat this hostile ðeode with an excess of mode.

Finally, this verse paragraph is enlightening for the *absence* as well as the *presence* of rhyme and homeoteleuton. Byrhtnoth’s short speech here (93–96) is notably lacking in rhyme. We have already noted that Byrhtnoth’s reply to the messenger was relatively free of this patterning of inflectional endings that is so common in *The Battle of Maldon* and so lacking in *The Wanderer*. Byrhtnoth’s prayer (173–80) also lacks rhyme, apart from the final line (180). Other speeches seem to follow suit, and there is scope here for follow-up work. For example, Ælfwine’s speech of encouragement lacks rhyme (lines 112–24) though the device returns immediately as soon as the character stops speaking and the narrative action resumes (225–29). Offa’s response to Ælfwine is similarly lacking in rhyming effects, apart from one case of the formulaic phrase “habban and

healdan" (236a). Does the poet wish to convey a significant distinction here between speech in poetry and narration in poetry?

Such, then, are the basic rhyming practices of our poet. Unlike Milton at the end of a tradition, repelled by "the jingling sound of like endings," this poet at the start of a new tradition was attracted to the new aesthetic. Adapting the earlier definition, we may say that the attraction was "the articulatory-acoustic relation between ... syllables that begin differently and end alike." The rhymes so produced are not unique to *The Battle of Maldon*, for other poets in the older corpus employ similar effects, but often they are simply sporadic uses of the device, and often the question becomes the fundamental (and for literary critics, unpopular) issue of intention: did the poet mean to create repetitive rhyming effects here? To answer this question requires some close literary-critical reading, supported by metrical and phonetic awareness. The use of internal rhyme at crucial moments in the action is one piece of evidence that our poet was consciously rhyming his words. Another is the clustering of these rhymed endings in narrative transitions, or at the end of sections, or to suggest narration rather than dialogue. The answer to my own question is in the affirmative: these rhymes are consistently patterned and deliberate poetic effects.

