



Isochrony of Middle English and Anglo-Norman and its bearing on verse in French romance

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It is a commonly repeated misconception that late Middle English's frequently used four-beat tetrameter narrative verse line was largely produced in emulation of octosyllabic verse imported into England in the 12th-13th centuries by Anglo-Norman poets versifying in French. This mistaken belief undoubtedly results from the age-old habit of identifying ways in which French influenced English while ignoring the ways English influenced French. This paper seeks to redress that imbalance by suggesting that Anglo-Norman poets devised their rhyming octosyllabic couplets in England under the influence of English metrical verse, before exporting the form back to the continent, where it was popularized most notably by Chrétien de Troyes for his much admired British-themed romances.

While Chrétien's use of rhyming octosyllables in continental French was not entirely unheralded, it was pioneering. All languages' preferred metrical verse structures are naturally informed by their suprasegmental isochrony, with syllable-timed languages (like French) preferring syllabic verse, stress-timed languages (like Old English) preferring accentual verse, while languages employing accentual-syllabic verse such as modern English or Russian show preferences for different sorts of feet, either iambs or trochees, the former lending itself to rhyme, while the latter is better suited to alliteration or assonance. Chrétien's sudden preference for rhyming octosyllabic couplets over the more traditional assonating decasyllabic *laisses* of the *chansons de gestes* was, therefore, innovative.

It is my contention that Chrétien did not devise *ex nihilo* the octosyllabic line in *françien*, but that he emulated Anglo-Norman exemplars, which he might have received from his patron, Marie de Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, both of whom were purported to have participated in the *cour d'amour* at Poitiers shortly before Chrétien began writing. Most of his Anglo-Norman predecessors and contemporaries – including Wace, Gaimar, Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Marie de France, etc. – were already writing French-language verse for the Plantagenets in octosyllabic couplets, a form which bears an uncanny similarity to the typical four-beat metre of both Old and “unsophisticated” Middle English verse.



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With chronological reference to the historical record and verse in Old and Middle English, Anglo-Norman and *francien*, this paper suggests that insular French changed under pressure from English from being syllable-timed to being stress-timed, a change in isochrony which encouraged Anglo-Norman poets to emulate the traditional four-beat English line in their ostensibly syllabic French verse. When this written form was then transmitted back to France, where it was retained in Chrétien's strictly syllabic verse for his romances, it was subsequently adopted by his successors for the genre, with which the form came to be inextricably associated.