

A Reconsideration of the Traditional Observation about Final -e

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1. Introduction

The traditional observation about final -e in Chaucer's versification is generally stated as follows: Final -e should be pronounced at the end of a line and within a line whenever the scansion so requires. It is usually elided before a word beginning with a vowel or an *h* sound.¹

If we examine *Troilus and Criseyde* (henceforth *TC*), the same word can often appear with or without the -e. The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the traditional observation of the final -e by investigating words with -e and without -e.

2. Final -e before a vowel or an *h* sound

I would like to show how conscious Chaucer was of the final -e and how wisely Chaucer employed the use of the final -e before a vowel and an *h* sound in *TC*. The following passages are from several lines in *TC*:²

U´ U´ U´ U´ U´
Criseyde al this aspied wel ynough,
 U´ U´ U´ U´ U´ U´ U´ U´
 For she was wis, and loved hym nevere the lasse,
 U´ U´ U´ U´
 Al nerre he malapert, or made it tough,
 U´ U´ U´ U´ U´ U´
 Or was to bold, to synge a fool a masse.

U ' U ' U ' U ' U ' U
 But whan his shame gan somewhat o passe,
 U ' U ' U ' U ' U ' U
 His resons, as I may my rymes holde,
 U ' U ' U ' U ' U ' U
 I yow wol telle, as techen bokes olde.

(TC III, 85-91)

These lines make us realize again that the traditional observation about the final -e is right. When I scanned all the lines in *TC*, I followed this rule. The loss of the final -e before vowels or words beginning with an h sound is observed not only in the above lines but also throughout *TC*. In order to illustrate my investigation, Table 1 lists several words where instances of the -e or the absence of -e are observed.³

Table 1

Noun

Example	Total	Rhyme	Before vowels or h	Other
beaute	12	1	2	9
beautee	1	1	0	0
bed	18	0	0	18
bedde	8	1	2	5
beere	7	5	1	1
blysse	1	1	0	0
care	23	22	1	0
cause	69	2	45	22
cheere	25	22	2	1
ende	31	24	5	2
grace	56	34	11	11
helle	18	14	4	0
herte	302	41	85	176
hope	39	1	37	1
Love	41	2	23	16
love	255	8	179	68

name	21	9	8	4
routhe	12	12	0	0
routhe	28	21	5	2
side	2	2	0	0
tyme	100	6	66	28
widewe	1	0	0	1
widewes	4	0	0	4
wille	11	4	3	4

Preposition

Example	Total	Rhyme	Before vowels or <i>h</i>	Other
about	1	0	0	1
aboute	38	15	14	9
above	9	6	2	1
ate	8	0	0	8
bitid	1	0	0	1
bitide	4	4	0	0
bitwene	5	5	0	0
bitwixe	3	0	3	0
bitwixen	10	0	0	0
before	1	0	0	1
byfore	7	2	2	3
thorough	61	0	0	61
through	1	0	0	1
withoute	10	5	1	4
withinne	25	8	11	6

Adjective

Example	TOTAL	Rhyme	Before vowels or <i>h</i>	Other
deere	89	54	23	12
dere	23	16	5	2
derk	2	0	0	2
derke	3	0	0	3

eterne	4	2	2	0
fast	1	0	0	1
faste	67	22	28	17
gret	48	0	0	48
grete	28	9	5	14
longe	57	13	21	23
old	4	0	0	4
olde	35	12	5	18
short	11	0	0	11
right	191	12	0	179
righte	8	0	0	8
short	11	0	0	11
shorte	6	0	1	5
straunge	6	3	1	2
swete	45	20	19	6
trewe	39	18	16	5
whit	2	0	0	2
white	12	5	3	4
wkke	5	2	2	1
wide	3	2	1	0
wise	64	36	12	16
yong	3	0	0	3
yonge	5	1	3	1

Verb

Example	Total	Rhyme	Before vowels or h	Other
answerd	4	0	0	4
answered	37	10	18	9
bet	46	3	0	43
bete	4	3	1	0
bid	4	0	0	0
bidde	9	0	5	4
bringe	1	0	1	0
bring	2	0	0	2

brynge	30	13	14	3
brought	16	2	0	14
broughte	7	4	2	1
caught	4	0	0	4
caughte	2	0	2	0
fele	16	1	12	3
felte	23	3	15	5
fil	12	0	0	12
fille	4	0	4	0
folowede	1	0	1	0
folowen	2	0	0	2
foloweth	3	0	0	3
folwe	3	0	2	1
folwede	1	0	1	0
fond	17	0	0	17
fonde	5	4	0	1
herd	29	0	0	29
herde	29	11	13	5
kep	4	2	0	2
kepe	15	5	7	3
made	46	6	29	11
make	53	11	32	10
prey	16	0	0	16
preyed	6	6	0	0
preye	33	24	7	2
preyede	2	0	2	0
redde	1	0	1	0
rede	31	24	5	2
set	13	1	0	12
sete	2	0	2	0
sette	31	12	16	3
sey	34	0	0	34
seyde	231	46	111	74
seye	79	67	7	5

stele	7	0	7	0
sterte	11	10	1	0
sterve	22	17	4	1
tel	15	0	0	15
telle	87	30	41	16
thought	36	10	0	26
thoughte	65	14	37	14
trowe	30	3	20	7
wep	4	0	0	4
wepe	20	7	13	0
wepte	5	1	3	1
wist	20	1	0	19
wiste	32	11	12	9
wol	202	0	0	202
wold	4	0	3	1
wolde	166	12	91	63

Adverb

Example	Total	Rhyme	Before vowels or h	Other
fast	1	0	0	1
faste	67	22	28	17
first	47	0	0	47
firste	8	0	1	7
here	159	63	50	46
ther	182	0	0	182
there	37	16	13	8

From Table 1 we can see how Chaucer used the words with final *-e* and without final *-e*. Naturally, the words without final *-e* did not cause any difficulty when scanned. However, because of meter, it was often difficult to decide whether or not the *-e* was pronounced. To further illustrate the traditional observation, consider the following words: *cause, grace, helle, herte, hope, name, tyme, aboute, withinne, deere, dere, faste, grete, longe, swete, trewe, wise, answerde, bidde,*

brynge, fele, felte, fille, made, make, seyde, thoughte, wolde, wiste and wepe. These examples clearly showed that the final *-e*, in many cases, is elided before a vowel or an *h* sound. It is often astonishing for modern readers that Chaucer used this technique in the medieval period.

3. Final *-e* is pronounced whenever scansion requires

Several books stated similar observations about final *-e* being pronounced whenever required by a scansion. However, the number of examples that exist in books is insufficient and limited to support the rule. How frequent this rule is applied in *TC* is not clear at all. Or in which case this statement refers to is not clear, either. Moreover, is it possible to conclude that the final *-e* is not pronounced if the meter does not require it? In this section, I would like to discuss this previous question. Let us look at the following examples.

U ^ U ^ U ^ U ^ U ^
 "Look up, I seye, and telle me what she is (I 862)
 U ^ U ^ U ^ U ^ U ^ U
 To telle me the fyn of his entente. (III 125)
 U ^ U ^ U ^ U ^ U ^ U
 In love, for which in wo to bedde he wente, (II 62)
 U ^ U ^ U ^ U ^ U ^ U
 It semeth nat that love doth yow longe, (II 546)

The verb *telle* appears in the first two examples. This verb is rhymed in *TC*, so the *-e* is considered pronounced. However, in line 862, the *-e* is not necessarily pronounced, but in line 125, it is pronounced to obtain a regular meter. The same phenomenon appears in lines 62 and 546. As long as a word is rhymed at the end of the line, the *-e* of the word is pronounced. But when a word is used within a line, the meter decides whether or not to read the *-e*. It is helpful to list the lines in which the final *-e* is not necessarily pronounced because the meter

does not require so. Table 2 is a summary of the lines where -e should not be pronounced in light of metre.⁴

Table 2

Volume	Line										
Book I	384	402	406	<u>417</u>	489	523	533	567	574	613	
	622	643	686	729	744	837	862	864	904	937	
Book II	33	59	62	96	109	143	170	299	358	528	590
	613	674	781	801	820	827	865	888	889	922	
	1166	<u>1187</u>	1200	1224	1394	1426	<u>1543</u>	1624			
	1666	1673	<u>1703</u>	<u>1704</u>							
Book III	46	49	172	233	245	253	368	387	390	708	745
	807	861	889	1143	1175	1273	1547	1591	1672		
	1812										
Book IV	119	168	393	415	581	639	866	952	999	1000	
	<u>1029</u>	<u>1031</u>	<u>1077</u>	1572	1617	1631	1652				
Book V	137	163	<u>235</u>	<u>248</u>	269	363	<u>380</u>	409	572	656	
	719	742	<u>748</u>	903	1055	1080	1092	1155	1309		
	1368	<u>1514</u>	<u>1515</u>	1637	1676	1697					

It is interesting to note that, in lines where it was difficult to determine whether or not the -e was pronounced, a few words appear more than once. They are *love*, *more*, *telle*, *namore*, *alle*, *nevere* and *evere*. There are 27, 10, 7, 5, 6, 2 and 3 instances respectively.

4. Final Remarks

In this paper, I reconsidered the traditional observation about the final -e in *TC*. This observation seems to be accepted among scholars of medieval English and literature without any debate. My investigation showed that the rule that the final -e is elided before a vowel and an *h* sound played the most important role in the versification of *TC*. Thus, my data strongly supports this aspect of the traditional observation.

Notes

1. This rule is stated in the books of Glowka, Kökeritz and Davies.

2. All the quotations in this paper are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*. Underlining is mine.

3. Several words like *hope* or *love* contain different parts of speech. The data is based on Chaucer's concordance listed in the bibliography.

4. Chaucer's rhymes provide evidence which suggests that final -e was pronounced in rhyme. But in several words there is no evidence that lead to decide the -e was pronounced. This is true of the underlined examples in the list. In this case, the circumstance in a line decides whether -e is pronounced or not.

Bibliography

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