

## CHILDISH GAMBINO AND CHAUCER: OLD ENGLISH IN MODERN RAP

Poetry predates the English language, and as such, changes in the evolution of the English language are typically marked in parallel with changes in the evolution of poetry. In particular, both the written and oral practices of Old English poetry have specific characteristics that play important roles in the evolution of the English language. It goes without saying that Old English poetry plays an important role in the development of our current iteration of the English language. While many people believe that Old English and Anglo-Saxon poetry is no longer written, a lot of the elements that made the poetry of those time periods significant are still prevalent in modern culture, usually in the form of hip-hop and rap music. Let's take a look at a piece of Old English poetry, and compare it to some modern "poetry" in the forms of *Beowulf* and the music of Childish Gambino.

While there are many different characteristics that we can define Old English poetry by, there are three that we will focus on for the sake of comparison: kennings, accentual verse, and alliteration. It seems fitting that we should use *Beowulf* as our example as Old English poetry, as it is the earliest example of Old English poetry that currently exists. Not only is it one of the best examples we have of the beginnings of the English language, its versions were passed down orally, collecting characteristics of the English language both written and spoken. For this reason, *Beowulf* is a solid foundation for us to base our examples of Old English on.

As an example of modern poetry in the form of hip-hop and rap, we'll examine the work of Donald Glover, who goes by the pen name Childish Gambino. Glover has been heralded as a prolific lyricist and all around creative voice. Not only is Glover a rapper and musician, he also writes scripts for movies and television shows, spends time doing stand-up comedy and acting,

and a variety of other creative pursuits through a variety of mediums. Due to the sheer amount of work Donald Glover has done in both writing and performing of the English language, Glover's lyrics serve as an excellent source of poetry within the realm of modern English.

Starting to look at the characteristics of Old English poetry, it makes sense to look at the very first lines of *Beowulf*. In both the original Old English and modern translations, we have examples of alliteration. In Old English: "Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum, beodcyninga, brym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon, (1-3)" and in modern English "LO, praise of the prowess of people-kings of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped, we have heard, and what honor the athelings won! (underlines added to illustrate alliteration)(1-3)(Nist)." Alliteration and assonance were used to make the stories easier to remember to hand down without the use of writing. It had the added benefit of sounding better and more "poetic" when recited, and drawing emphasis to a line (Harris). For this reason, alliteration is used in hip-hop, too, and specifically by Donald Glover in his lyrics.

Much of Childish Gambino's lyrics are rife with alliteration, and is often used to to emphasise points during the course of the song, or to make specific lines stick out among the rest of the piece. For example, the very first line in the song "Sweatpants" contains six examples of alliteration within a single line "**W**atching haters **w**onder **w**hy **G**ambinos **g**ot the **g**ame locked." Later on in the same song, Glover uses assonance to break the verse up and draw attention to a few lines: "Real n\*gga, I rep **those**. Why **though**? Cause I said **so**. Hip deep in the **Pepto**, I got five on her like Ben **Folds**. I got more tail than that **PetCo**, you faker than some Sweet'N **Low** (bold added to illustrate assonance)("Sweatpants")." As we can see, not only do both *Beowulf*

and “Sweatpants” by Childish Gambino use alliteration, they use them for similar purposes and in almost identical ways.

Another distinctive characteristic of Old English poetry is the use of kennings. Kennings are unique word combinations used to convey different objects in an almost metaphorical way (Cuddon). We encounter these early on in *Beowulf* (such as “whale-road” in line 10 when talking about the sea), and find them sprinkled in throughout the rest of piece in several places, and used in several ways. Kennings are found predominantly in the battle that takes place from line 817-819, including “bone-adorned,” “life-days,” “sin-scather,” “bone-locks,” and “slaughter-storm. (Nist)” Kennings are used in an attempt by the storyteller or poet to paint more vivid pictures when portraying a story. When reading the list of kennings used in these three lines alone, we get a sense of the epicness the author was trying to convey to anyone that heard the story (Harris). This method of word manipulation for the sake of dramatism, embellishment, and story telling is prominent in the rap and hip-hop lyrics of today, too.

Though not necessarily apparent upon surface viewing, Childish Gambino’s lyrics also contain a fair amount of kennings. In “Outside,” we are treated to a few particularly poignant kennings. Some examples include “stone-face,” “fat-nose,” “hood-sh\*t,” “word-slaying,” and “young-tease” (“Outside”). All of these word combinations have the potential to stand on their own, though when viewed as kennings, take on a whole new set of meanings.

While the use of alliteration and kennings are strong arguments for the continuation of principles and characteristics developed in Old English poetry, the use of accentual verse is probably the most striking similarity between the two eras. Accentuated verse is the method of writing lines based not on syllables (such as a sonnet), but a variety of “strong-” or “weak-” beats,

or stresses in each line. This is another example of something being written for the express purpose of being shared orally, and is found throughout the entirety of *Beowulf*. For example in lines 20-25 (bold added to denote strong-stress):

So **becomes** it a **youth** to **quit** him **well** (10 syllables)

**with** his **father's** friends, by **fee** and **gift**, (9)

**that** to **aid** him, **aged**, in **after** days, (9)

come **warriors** **willing**, should **war** draw **nigh**, (10)

**liegemen** **loyal**: by **lauded** **deeds** (8)

shall an **earl** have **honor** in **every** **clan**. (11) (Nist)

As we can see, when written out, syllable count varies, while the number of strong-beats remains consistent throughout the section. This provided a rhythm whose purpose was to increase the ease of recital, and emphasis on specific words or the benefit of the piece. This rings true for hip-hop and rap as well.

Beat and rhythm reign supreme in almost all instances of hip-hop and rap. The entirety of Childish Gambino's catalogue could be cited as an example for syllable count mattering very little while the number of strong and weak beats within a given set of lines being the only thing that mattered. The second verse of Gambino's "Freaks and Geeks" does a great job of illustrating this (bolds added to denote strong stress):

Okay, I'm **down** with the **black** girls of **every** single **culture** (15 syllables)

**Filipino**, **Armenian** **girls** on my **sofa** (13)

Yeah I **like** a **white** girl, **sometimes** we get **together** (13)

Need a **thick** chick **though**, so it's **black** and yellow, **black** and yellow (15)

**Love** is a **trip**, but **f\*ckin'** is a **sport** (10)

Are there **Asian** girls **here**? **Minority report** (12) (“Freaks and Geeks”)

As is the case in *Beowulf*, word stress remains constant and is placed on words to provide specific emphasis while syllable count doesn't matter.

When we look at these examples side by side, it becomes apparent that while the argument for Old English poetry not being written anymore is certainly understandable, it isn't entirely true. Through the use of alliteration, kennings, and accentuated verse; the characteristics of Old English poetry are still very much alive and in use today, in the form of hip-hop and rap music. In fact, when we continue to look at the cultural impact and significance Old English poetry had on the development of the English language, it seems like the possibility that the procedures and rules used to write and refine Old English poetry could ever disappear entirely is not only unlikely, but near impossible. We just have to look for it in less obvious places, like the work of Childish Gambino.

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