Essay

Rude Railing Rhymers: Reading Close Rhyme in Skeltonic Verse and Hip-Hop

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> Thus the people telles, / Rayles lyke rebelles
> —John Skelton, "Collyn Clout" (ca. 1522)

> Yes—the rhythm, the rebel / Without a pause, I'm lowering my level
> —Public Enemy, "Rebel without a Pause" (1988)

It "aggressively asserts itself, often without invitation, upon our consciousness."[1] Its creator is "beastly," its reception "like being blasted up against a wall."[2] Known for "pleasing only the popular ear," it "represents the lowest form of entertainment in this country."[3] Formally, it is composed of "senseless" rhymes apt "to sacrifice complexity for intensity."[4] It would be "in vain to apologise for the coarseness, obscenity, and scurrility" of its verse; "amazingly fecund," its seductions are "powerful and disturbing."[5] A "rebellious form," it is "a style nobody can deal with," a window into "a world of complexity and contradiction."[6] A "street-level art form," it connotes "a sophisticated worldliness," "addressing the people in the language of the people."[7] A "wedding of dissonance and dissidence," it features "sharply-attacked and crisp delivery" and "the natural ease of speech rhythm."[8] Its aim "is to bang out a rhythmic idea, not to impress you with the literal meaning of the words."[9] It runs "as long as the resources of the language hold out"; it opens, through rhyme, to the "startling music of language itself."[10]

The Skeltonic and hip-hop are hard to parse in this critical sample, which runs from the derogatory to the celebratory.[11] On the surface, the two formal projects seem worlds apart. The Skeltonic, a verse form invented by the English poet John Skelton at the turn of the

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sixteenth century, features short lines and irregular, often extensive runs of end rhyme (Nelson 86–87).[12] Hip-hop, which first emerged among Black and Latino communities in the South Bronx in the 1970s, encompasses a broad set of aesthetic forms, including graffiti art, break dancing, and break beats.[13] Yet the lyrics that now dominate hip-hop spiral against a metrical backdrop to reveal a poetic form as unpredictable, and as rhyme-heavy, as the Skeltonic.[14] This resonance is remarkable not least because of the historical gulf separating the two art forms. If the Skeltonic is considered a formal oddity, the literary-historical digression of one strange poet, hip-hop represents a cultural renaissance—"one of the big ideas of this generation," as the hip-hop chronicler Jeff Chang describes it ("Hip-Hop Arts" x), rooted in Black American musical innovation.[15] Hip-hop's renaissance, moreover, has continued to evolve since its inception, gaining institutional legitimacy and internal diversity, from commercially produced hits to underground styles, from the more regular, percussive beats of its early years to the "mumble rap" prevalent today.[16] This diversity, moreover, spans race, nation, gender, and class. Hip-hop is everywhere in the twenty-first century, constantly mutating and continually contested.

The fact of this contestation, however, provides a key for the comparison with the Skeltonic, which occupies a similarly contentious place in literary history. At a formal level, this disruptive, unassimilable quality takes shape in the anomalous use of rhyme—propulsive, overabundant, and excessively close—that anchors both the Skeltonic and almost all hip-hop, despite every other dimension of diversity. Close rhyme, in these cases, takes the form of dense and compressed patterns of rhyming words, whether those be long series of end rhymes punctuating short lines or internal rhymes working in and across longer ones.[17] Viewed as parallel formal responses to disparate historical conditions, the Skeltonic and hip-hop together invite more questions than they resolve. Why close rhyme? What sense and power do these diverse projects derive from sonic repetition? And why has this formal strategy proved so difficult to assimilate in literary history?

Various new formalisms suggest that attending to form requires an acknowledgment of patterned continuity over time and across context.[18] If so, the intermittent signals emitted by close rhyme suggest that formalism also warrants attention to resistant or dissident patterns, the periodic emergence of forms that are not readily assimilated into the sweep of literary history yet persist and flash up over long periods. Close rhyme across the Skeltonic and hip-hop offers one example: it represents dissent aesthetically, running contrary to predominant literary trends, and politically, elevating disenfranchised voices and populist concerns. At the same time, dissident form "may be democratic," as Imani Perry writes of hip-hop, but it is not "inherently liberatory" (7). Both the Skeltonic and hip-hop bear paradoxical politics, in which protest can veer into prejudice, and the poet's voice can crowd out the community it claims to represent.

Critics in both fields have grappled with this political ambivalence on their own terms, but a comparative approach, one that views hip-hop's rhymes and Skeltonic verse as analogous forms, offers new perspectives on each project and on the poetic and political affordances of close rhyme itself. If the Skeltonic represents "a point at which aesthetics and politics collide," as Lucy Munro contends (339–40), hip-hop's entanglement of close rhyme and controversy offers a fresh vantage on the forms and conditions that generate literary dissonance. The exclusionary views evident in some popular hip-hop, in turn, suggest that Skelton's own expressions of misogyny and nativism might have stemmed as much from historical context as from the experience of navigating a changing world from a marginal position, one in which he was at times admitted to centers of power and at others excluded, an experience hip-hop artists continue to face.

In the first section of this essay, I make the case for this transhistorical comparison, taking a closer look at the reception histories of the Skeltonic and hip-hop to parse how close rhyme has come to shape perceptions of each as unassimilable, artless, and transgressive. In the second section, I read three central moments in the Skeltonic's development—"Collyn Clout" (ca. 1522), "The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummynge" (ca.

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1517), and "Phyllyp Sparowe" (ca. 1505)—against three key instances of hip-hop's movement into the mainstream: Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" (1988), Jay-Z's "Ninety-Nine Problems" (2003), and Eminem's "The Real Slim Shady" (2000). This discussion aims to contextualize, and hold in question, the subversive potential of close rhyme in each. In closing, I offer suggestions for further inquiry wedged open by this unusual comparison.

Through Line: Close Rhyme

The origin of the Skeltonic is, and has long been, something of a mystery.[19] This difficulty owes in part to the idiosyncrasy of Skelton himself, whose career spanned the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and attached to both church and state. A priest, poet laureate, and *orator regius* under Henry VIII, Skelton nevertheless remained a marginal figure in Henry's court: the position of poet laureate was not institutionalized until 1688, and Skelton scholars speculate that *orator regius* was more the poet's innovation than a grant of royal authority. In any case, his attacks on Thomas Wolsey and other members of the king's circle eventually facilitated his departure before 1520.[20] His poetic output similarly fell outside the bounds of what would come to be called the English Renaissance, and critics have struggled to locate him in literary history as a result. Most commonly, he has been characterized as a liminal figure, an uneasy transition point between the medieval period and the early Renaissance.[21] From C. S. Lewis's conclusion that Skelton had "no real predecessors and no important disciples" (143) to Andrew Hadfield's description of the Skeltonic as "a dead-end as far as the history of English literature or language was concerned" (49), contemporary criticism has left Skelton "an anomaly, standing at an oblique angle to the English literary canon" (Griffiths, *John Skelton* 3).

Literary history has room for anomalies but limited explanatory power for their unique contours: anomalies are the exceptions that prove the rule of literary-critical success, a truism that has governed Skelton's transhistorical reception. Despite uneven popularity and acclaim during his lifetime, by the early seventeenth century the Skeltonic had largely become a parody of itself.[22] This treatment owed in part to overlapping portrayals of Skelton and the mythical clown figure John Scoggin (Pollet 150–53).[23] But it came to George Puttenham to declare that Skelton "was a bad poet and a lecherous historical figure" (Barnes 42). As he explained in *The Arte of English Poesie*, Puttenham thought Skelton "a sharpe Satirist, but with more rayling and scoffery then became a Poet Lawreat," given his overemphasis on "Scurrillities and other ridiculous matters" (62). This ethical shortcoming was matched by formal failure: "(usurping the name of a Poet Laureat) being in deede but a rude rayling rimer and all his doings ridiculous, he used both short distaunces and short measures pleasing onely the popular eare" (84). This assessment set the terms of Skelton's reception for centuries; as late as 1778, Thomas Warton determined that "Skelton would have been a writer without decorum at any period," his "subjects . . . often as ridiculous as his metre" (78–79). As common speech gained ground in poetic theory, however, Skelton was tentatively resuscitated—William Wordsworth, for instance, found him "a demon in point of genius" (90)—and finally celebrated by a handful of early-twentieth-century poets for his "inalienable metre" (Golding 30). W. H. Auden, in more measured fashion, equated Skelton with "the average man of his time and class" (178), praising his verse for its fast tempo and speechlike cadence and emphasizing his role as an "entertainer" (185), fit to deliver "abuse or flyting, not satire" (183), "caricature" not genius (184). Lewis concurred: Skelton's "charm," evincing no high intention or skill, was that "of the really gifted amateur" (142).

The strange and ambivalent staying power revealed by Skelton's reception history surely owes to an array of historical contingencies, but less accidental is the sheer audacity of Skelton's poetic style. While historicist approaches have taken Skelton scholarship a considerable way, recent formalist interventions in literary studies offer intriguing new directions for understanding the resistant utility of Skelton's close rhyme. These interventions extend beyond the new formalist ethic of

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"rededication" and emphasis on close reading (Levinson 561).[24] Some critics, for instance, have argued that long time frames are necessary to grasp "historicizable features of the aesthetic that are either smaller or larger than the particular work of art" (Hayot 743)—from device to genre to language itself.[25] Form, these scholars argue, is historical but is not for that reason attached to historical context.[26] Form often crosses, exceeds, and disrupts historical context, and it is the continuity of formal patterns that enables this transhistorical consideration. "One of the most important features of form," Maura Nolan writes, "is its resistance to linear chronology, its tendency to persist over time in relatively stable fashion, and to forge links between radically different historical moments" (8). Formal stability also facilitates extraliterary comparison; Caroline Levine defines form as "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference," literary and social, as they interact and conflict (3). Indeed, many of these formalist contributions foreground literature's work in the world, its hold on diverse readers across disparate social and temporal contexts—what Wai Chee Dimock describes as the "randomness of literary action—its unexpected readership, unexpected web of allegiance" ("Planetary Time" 489). Given this sweeping field of play, a text's "resonance is inseparable from dissonance, from the outbursts of sound produced when the reader clashes with the author, when their semantic universes fail to coincide" (Dimock, "Theory" 1067).

Dissonance is a particularly useful concept for thinking through the form of the Skeltonic, given its unruly, disruptive quality in and beyond its own time. In fact, the Skeltonic draws out the presence of formal difference and disruption both in and across periods in ways that have not fully surfaced in new formalism. Take Rita Felski's approach to "textual mobility and transhistorical attachment" (154), which employs

> a language of addition rather than subtraction, translation rather than separation, connection rather than isolation, composition rather than critique. . . . Only by making attachments and forging alliances are [texts] able to make a difference. Rather than stressing their otherness, autonomy, nontransferability, we point out their portability, mobility, and translatability. (182)

As this framing admits, a focus on attachment over alterity captures only half of the social life of literary forms. What is more, different forms invite, even require, distinct critical orientations, as recent contributions to the field show. Michaela Bronstein, for instance, charts the future-oriented utility of "recuperative" modernism (12), while Stephen Best points to the "unhistoricism" and "*unbelonging*" of self-extinguishing art forms (10). The Skeltonic, by contrast, presents itself as at once a hostile object and an infectious style. "Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization," Levine points out (6), and these functions are compressed and multiplied in the close rhyme of the Skeltonic, generating powerful and at times unwieldy effects.[27]

Kathleen Tonry describes the path of Skelton scholarship as swerving between formalist and historicist poles; in her view, this tension has been attenuated by medievalists newly attentive to Skelton's self-conscious negotiation of his own changing moment. This integrative account, while compelling, still seems to neglect Skelton's persistent singularity.[28] As Roland Greene has written of "Collyn Clout," Skelton's verse "deserves a certain attention it has scarcely had—neither prospective, nor retrospective, neither strictly generic nor firmly historical, but on its own strange and original terms" (230).[29] Far from foreclosing either formal or historical inquiry, the strangeness of the Skeltonic suggests the value of a comparative approach that, instead of attempting to chart influence over time, observes patterns across time, drawing out the literary-social conditions that foster certain poetic strategies, particularly strategies that sit in an oppositional relationship to contemporaneous artistic production. For such disruptive forms, influence misses those points of transhistorical resonance that speak to oddity and controversy—or, in the case of Skelton, to "bottomless and apparently free-floating aggression" (Halpern 103).

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Close rhyme, for its part, sounds its dissonance forward and backward in time. Rhyme itself has waxed and waned in the English literary tradition; during the Renaissance, it offered writers invested in the English vernacular, including Puttenham and Philip Sidney, a tool to challenge Latin verse, which generally went unrhymed.[30] For a brief period, however, medieval Latin verse, too, was dominated by the "tirade rhyme," an outpouring of unchecked rhyme that, in William Nelson's words, "grew so exceedingly popular that it became a necessity rather than a gaud" (89). While this development was short-lived, rhymed prose continued to flourish up through the fourteenth century such that rhyme ornamented every clause in a number of works—even papal edicts were issued to discourage the convention—until, finally, "the fad cracked of its own weight" (91). Still, by the Elizabethan era, "there were some for whom rhymed prose had become an obsession" (95). In these instances, rhyme emerged as a "stylistic contagion" (Munro 343), one that threatened to suffuse or overdetermine literary production. The quality of this contagion was both figurative and literal: rhyme draws likeness across disparate and even oppositional ideas in sometimes aggressive ways, but its mnemonic capacity—its service "in the knitting up of the memory," to use Sidney's phrase (368)—adds an infectious quality to the public life of literary expression.

If we read the "tirade rhyme" not as an influence on the Skeltonic but rather as a parallel to it, so might we read hip-hop's verse as an analogous form, a similar instantiation of the transhistorical impulse for propulsive, transgressive rhyme. Undoubtedly, hip-hop's rootedness in Black American communities and cultural traditions has shaped its form. Notable influences include the spoken-word poetics of Gil Scott-Heron, the Last Poets, the Watts Prophets, H. Rap Brown, and Muhammad Ali; oral traditions such as the dozens, toasts, and other forms of signifying; musical genres including blues, jazz, reggae, funk, and soul; and rhetorical performances by Black preachers, radio personalities, and activists.[31] At the same time, hip-hop stands apart from its forerunners. Many early spoken-word poets recorded their verses over percussive backdrops but leaned less heavily on rhyme.[32] Those who did foreground rhyme did so without the formative relationship to the DJ's beat and digital sampling technologies that are so central to hip-hop as a musical form.[33] Elevating verbal virtuosity in dialogue with this technological backdrop, hip-hop comes as an emergent creation, off-kilter from its poetic and musical predecessors.

The beat, of course, also marks hip-hop off from the Skeltonic, although some critics and many artists have made the case for hip-hop's reception as poetry.[34] In these circles, hip-hop's beat is often situated as the concrete manifestation of poetic meter.[35] It is arguably the beat's regularity, further, that has enabled the dense complexity of hip-hop's rhymes—identical and polysyllabic rhyme, internal rhyme (including chain and bridge techniques), and off rhyme—which are central to its poetic merit.[36] Foregrounding hip-hop's lyrics does not neglect the form's musical dimensions but positions them within a literary frame that is true to the form itself.[37] Emerging within a complex field of disruption, marginalization, and innovation, hip-hop has demonstrated one primary interest since its inception: "the power of the word, especially its rhyme and its rhythm" (Wood 135).[38] This commitment to rhyme in the lyrics of hip-hop's MC, articulated over and in response to the DJ's beat, echoes the Skeltonic's obsession with rhyme insofar as it is freely and exuberantly wielded, and in stark contrast to almost every poetic trend of the day.[39]

Analogy attends to history and form, but instead of tracking influence, development, or collision, it allows for anomaly, isolation, and repetition across sometimes vast difference.[40] Analogy provides a critical frame, in other words, that fits the form of the Skeltonic and hip-hop, each emerging in a particular time and somehow out of sync with it.[41] The tight repetitions of close rhyme, in turn, themselves draw nonlinear parallels across disparate domains, enacting on a small scale the logic of analogy. The modes of reading close rhyme are thus not limited to any one text or to text itself, because close rhyme is so auditory and outward-oriented—catchy or jarring, depending on whom it reaches. We see

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one such effect in Puttenham's warning against "the over busie and too speedy returne of one maner of tune," which does "too much annoy and as it were glut the ear" (83). This formal quality shaped Skelton's reception: across his defenders and detractors, the connection between the "formlessness" (Nelson 83) of his verse and its moral daring or turpitude—the conflation of "the immorality of his ideas and the looseness of his prosody" (Heiserman 8)—remained remarkably consistent.

This same equation of aesthetic and ethical shortcoming appears in hip-hop's popular reception, offering insight into the formal dimensions of its disruptions. Hip-hop's reputation as a vehicle for dangerous ideas and moral and cultural degeneration arose in response to West Coast gangsta rap, which in the late 1980s replaced the party-centric beats of early hip-hop and the Afrocentric, protest-based lyrics of the East Coast's "Golden Age" with gritty, nihilistic, and often profane narratives. Capitalizing on the commercial popularity of the "outlaw" and Black American "badman" traditions, hip-hop's cultural influence soared in the 1990s and early 2000s, inaugurating a backlash that persists and that paradoxically fuels hip-hop's productivity and cachet today.[42] The racist stereotyping that conflates "rage" and violence with Black masculinity has been well documented, but less frequently noted is the connection of such discourse with the transgressive quality of rhyme. Among hip-hop's critics, rhyme often appears as an index or addendum to its "noise," its "riot of sound and images" (Shelby 253).[43] Loren Kajikawa argues that hip-hop's sonic qualities encode enduring associations of Blackness with violent disruption, and rhyme is not precluded from this process of "sounding race" (2); the group Public Enemy, for instance, is often described in terms of the group's "combustive rhythms and rebellious rhymes" (qtd. in Kajikawa 2). But this idea also emerges from within hip-hop itself. Public Enemy's Chuck D calls himself "the incredible rhyme animal" (Public Enemy, "Bring the Noise"), a "hard rhymer" ("Rebel without a Pause") for whom "what counts is that the rhyme's / Designed to fill your mind" ("Fight the Power").[44] Jay-Z similarly riffs on "the power of rhymes" to persuade by the force of tautology—"it is what it is" (243)—and to invade thoughts with ties binding the seemingly unconnected; in short, rhyme, like rap, "plants dissonance in your head" (54). For hip-hop's artists, audience, and interlocutors, both rhyme and the beat it overlays are understood as subversive and transgressive, mirroring on a sonic level the threat that Black power and often Black masculinity are said to pose to white America.[45]

Rhyme also rests at the center of literary repudiations of hip-hop, by those poets and critics who insist it traffics in simplistic rhyme patterns and senseless messages (Caplan 12–14). Much as Alexander Pope once denounced "still *expected Rhymes*" for their tendency to generate mechanical sentiments ("Essay" 279), these critics suggest that hip-hop's commitment to rhyme, privileging sound over sense, readily devolves into rote meaninglessness. Others, however, have pointed out that rhyme possesses a performative power that brings its own meaning into being, giving rise to new structures of knowledge by way of its associative tendency, its ability to draw lines of equivalence that stick in the mind.[46] It is a long-standing trope, David Caplan notes, "that rhyme retains a certain malevolent influence" (80).[47] Rhyme's presence in hip-hop, moreover, has only grown more complex; when it first emerged, hip-hop centered on the DJ, but as soon as MCs were introduced to engage the crowd, their rhymes quickly reoriented the performances such that "within this new culture rhyme became—and three decades later remained—the most valued element of hip hop lyricism" (Cobb 44).[48] For hip-hop scholars, "rhyme" indexes end rhymes as well as rap's lyrics at large, its constant verbal play illustrating the drive "to find homonymic connections that serve either to undermine, parody, or connect in a surprising way the underlying connotations of language" (Potter 82). This linguistic play grew as hip-hop migrated from live performance to the recording studio, enabling rap artists to explore more complex poetic narratives and rhyme schemes (Kajikawa 19–48). While "Rapper's Delight," hip-hop's first recorded single, brought the form to popular audiences in a straightforward rhyme scheme and meter, rap quickly

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compounded and complicated its rhymes, generating rhythmically, semantically, and syntactically complex lyrics set against heavy, repetitive beats. This dexterity has not gone unnoticed in some literary circles, including among literary critics who contribute to hip-hop studies and contemporary print poets who cultivate rhyme in direct homage to hip-hop (Caplan 103–38).

At the same time, rhyme has also been a major source of hip-hop's vulnerability, its easy transmission opening it to critique, parody, and appropriation equal and opposite to its own force. Close rhyme captures on a formal level the paradoxical position hip-hop occupies in the public mind—at once culturally potent and marginal, profound and jejune, dangerous and trite. Its dexterous rhymes complicate straightforward interpretation, troubling hegemonic narratives and representing a willful creativity and "radical commitment to otherness" that center Black negotiations of oppression and marginality alongside the textures and pleasures of everyday life (I. Perry 47). In privileging play over message, hip-hop authorizes a semantic release that leaves its cultural and political ends indeterminate. The Skeltonic showed itself susceptible in just this regard, and Skelton found himself anxiously amending his work in response to public critique. Close rhyme, in the Skeltonic and hip-hop, incorporates the contradictory in its unremitting sweep, rendering its practitioners' politics as ambivalent as their poetics are productive.

Marginality and Its Discontents

Skelton's "Collyn Clout" announces itself as a public poem—a protest against "the clergy, the nobility, the heretical laity, and the disorder of the times" (Heiserman 197–98)—delivered to and for the people.[49] Collyn, the poem's speaker, takes his message and authority from the street; as he reports,

> Thus I, Collyn Cloute,
> As I go aboute,
> And wandrynge as I walke,
> I here the people talke. (lines 285–88)

The speaker himself connotes a kind of rustic patchwork: "Collyn" signifies a pastoral figure, while "Clout" might mean a cloth, rag, or clot of earth.[50] This commoner's identity proves a source of some anxiety for Collyn, who not only moves among the common man, but talks like him too:

> For though my ryme be ragged,
> Tattered and jagged,
> Rudely rayne-beaten,
> Rusty and mothe-eaten,
> Yf ye take well therwith,
> It hath in it some pyth. (lines 53–58)

As this disclaimer reveals, Collyn's rough edges also justify his verse, exemplifying his status as a man of the people, one whose marginal status affords him a degree of social mobility and critical force.[51]

Skelton's sense of the paradoxical power of marginality likely owes to his navigation of a rapidly changing world. Scholars trace the beginning of his career to 1488, when Skelton was "created poete laureate in the vnyuersite of oxenforde" as a mark of his facility for rhetoric (Barnes 29). The scholastic training marked by this award was on the wane as humanism began its ascent at the turn of the century, a trend Skelton would come to fiercely oppose. Appointed as Prince Henry's royal tutor by 1497, he lost the position only a few years later when Henry took the throne. Forced into "relative exile" as a rector in a rural town (Edwards 4), Skelton petitioned his way back to court, eventually serving as a court entertainer responsible for composing "flytings," or invective verse, directed at the Scottish and French. A minor figure in Henry's court, Skelton nonetheless held the (likely self-appointed) title *orator regius* until he retired (or was forced to retire) to Westminster. Bolstered by the security of this retreat, he fired a slew of satirical verse at Wolsey, the most powerful figure in Henry's court, before accepting Wolsey's patronage and redirecting his ire at political outsiders (Halpern 103). Skelton's sense of marginality thus resulted not from total exclusion but from the liminal, unstable access to social and political power that motivated his poetic productions. Because over the course of

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his career that power migrated to the king's court, the insecurity of his position was at times mitigated, and at others magnified, by "the instability of royal favour as a basis for power" (C. Perry 310). His satirical verse, too, sometimes enhanced and sometimes impinged on his social status, even as that marginal status directed the aim and force of his satire.

One rationale for Skelton's contradictory career lies in the danger of critique in his historical moment: the modern institution of the "author," as a position of secular authority from which dissent could be legitimized, was not yet formed, and the state under Henry VIII had reached a new level of repression. Skelton's popular persona, it might appear, emerged as a buffer to protect himself from retribution.[52] Skelton's own marginality was not so marked as his speaker's; as Greene points out, Collyn Clout's "name and poem exaggerate the poet's disenfranchisement from society so as to give his social criticisms more weight" (234). Nevertheless, by turning to a poetics of marginality, Skelton succeeded in further alienating himself, at least temporarily, from the most powerful figures in the Henrician court. Central to this poetics was the use of close rhyme, which Curtis Perry notes was "ideally suited to boisterous vituperation" and thus at once legible within the court's competitive atmosphere and dangerous (311), at times distancing Skelton from the spheres of early modern power even as it marked out a space for the emergence of his peculiar poetic persona.

This position comes into focus with a closer look at the way hip-hop artists have deployed close rhyme to transform marginality into protest, self-genesis, and power.[53] The people, for instance, are also central to the poetic message of Public Enemy, a paragon of popular dissent from hip-hop's golden years. "Power to the people," as Chuck D and the Public Enemy hype man Flavor Flav chant toward the end of "Fight the Power," an anthem of resistance commissioned for Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*. Formally, the song hinges on a call-and-response chorus with the "people," "brothers and sisters" invoked in the instruction to "fight the power" and in the invitation to "lemme hear you say. . . ." Chuck D and Flavor Flav, in turn, situate themselves as of the people ("what we got to say?") and for the people, representatives and agitators. Even the song's production was designed to echo the sounds of the block; according to the producer Hank Shocklee, its samples were multiplied and layered to "resonate on the street level" (Grow).

This commitment came from the group's affiliation with the city and its people as much as its separation from them. As they were the first to admit, Public Enemy was a product of the suburbs: the group's founding members met on Long Island and recognized the relative privilege, coupled with intense racism and segregation, of that background (Chang, *Can't Stop* 236). Public Enemy leveraged that opportunity to speak to and for a public they not only named but brought into being—in staging the song's music video, also directed by Lee, they themselves convened a "Young Person's March to End Racial Violence." The group's lyrics in that context take on an incantatory power, the mantra "fight the power" echoed by a crowd Chuck D and Flavor Flav move in and out of—walking with the march, shouting through a megaphone, performing from the stage. "Listen if you're missin," Chuck D insists, "swingin while I'm singin, / Givin what ya gettin" (Public Enemy, "Fight"). The experience is theirs, but the message and the microphone are his, his lyrics "a start, a work of art to revolutionize / Make a change." Until the revolution comes, however: "We are the same—no, we're not the same." The MCs are both of the crowd and held apart.

Public Enemy's mobility within this emergent public was countered by the broader response to *Do the Right Thing*, which stirred white fears of racial discontent, criticism that was augmented by a crew member's expression of extreme anti-Semitic views (Chang, *Can't Stop* 277–92). Yet the film used "Fight the Power" as a leitmotif that was intended to sound provocatively, a formal role that echoed Public Enemy's wider legibility. In Chuck D's words, "there was always resistance to Public Enemy" (Grow), a historical observation and an ontological one, given the group's name and ethos. Resistance to and from the status quo was as central to Public Enemy's poetic production as it was to Skelton's

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satirical verse, and similarly two-sided. In these works, marginality becomes a poetic and political resource that is at once a catalyst of critique and cause for censorship and censure.[54]

In both hip-hop and the Skeltonic, community uplift and protest are further complicated by competition, the poet's need to affirm his own lyrical supremacy.[55] Adam Bradley draws precisely this connection between the two: "Like a fifteenth-century battle rapper, Skelton uses rhyme chains to underscore his energy, aggression, and—to use a very twenty-first-century word for it—swagger" (65). In both battle rap and Skelton's invective verse, insult is conscripted into the construction of the speaker's superiority and even identity, established in relation to the diminished other.[56] In the first recorded rap battle, for instance, Kool Moe Dee followed Busy Bee Starski's opening performance with a head-on attack, establishing his own mastery and Busy Bee's amateurism in the same breath: "I'll take the title right here on the spot / How can I take a title you ain't got?" (Berry 85). This dialectical individualism—enabled by and at the same time derived at the expense of community—is equally present in Skelton's flytings. Take "Agenst Garnesche" (ca. 1514), in which Skelton reacts to an insult from another member of Henry's court, using his opponent's diminishment—"Ye, syr, rayle all in deformite" (line 7)—to preface his own elevation: "Calliope / Hath pointyd me to rayle on the" (lines 87–88).

This quality makes hip-hop and the Skeltonic indisputably creative and productive forms, requiring their lyricists to continually flex their linguistic skills in order to prove the point of their own virtuosity.[57] For Skelton, whose status depended on the "honor of Englond" ("Agenst Garnesche," line 95), that poetic production also came to incorporate a xenophobic attitude toward foreigners and ethnic others, including, in "Collyn Clout," "Turke, Sarazyn or Jewe" (line 431). Misogyny is equally explicit and extensive across much of Skelton's verse, perhaps most notably in "Elynour Rummynge," which Elizabeth Fowler describes as "an architect's folly in which the gingerbread ornament of misogyny overwhelms a barely-recognizable structure of ideas" (134). As Fowler argues, the poem's "virulent and ornate misogyny" owes to a long tradition of clerical antifeminism designed to dissuade clergymen like Skelton from marrying and entrepreneurial women like the real-life Elynour Rummynge from running businesses (135). But while Skelton's depiction of Elynour might echo standard medieval portraits of older women in the style of Chaucer's Wife of Bath or La Vieille from *Le Roman de la Rose*, his use of close rhyme drives it toward something else entirely. Elynour is not only "well worne in age" (line 8) with a "vysage" (9) that "woldt aswage / A mannes courage" (10–11); her face is also

> nothynge clere,
> But ugly of chere,
> Droupy and drowsy,
> Scurvy and lowsy;
> Her face all bowsy. (13–17)

Extending for one hundred lines, Skelton's decadent description is almost necessarily transgressive; given the formal project of developing extensive rhyme sequences across so many lines, Skelton's speaker is forced to break new discursive ground. For this reason, it comes as little surprise that the poem has been read as both reactionary and revolutionary. Some, for instance, see Skelton's grotesque descriptions of the female body as a misogynistic metaphor for social disorder and corruption.[58] Others locate in the poem a carnivalesque form of subversion, in which an exuberant appropriation of stereotypes enables a radical, if delimited, fantasy of woman-centered agency and community.[59]

This bifurcated response helps contextualize the distinct forms of misogyny that have grown into one of hip-hop's more reliable resources, alongside occasionally homophobic and, less frequently, anti-Semitic lyrics.[60] Where it appears, particularly in commercial hits of the late 1990s and early 2000s, hip-hop's misogyny can be both extreme and overwhelming. At the same time, scholars have characterized misogyny as a response to racialized disempowerment, a view that the hip-hop mogul Jay-Z's discussion of his own widely acclaimed "Ninety-Nine Problems" partially supports.[61]

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Insisting that the hook ("I got ninety-nine problems but a bitch ain't one") "is a joke, bait for lazy critics," Jay-Z acknowledges that "even as I was recording it, I knew someone, somewhere would say, 'Aha, there he goes talking about them hoes and bitches again!' And, strangely, this struck me as being deeply funny" (56). Because racist scripts overdetermine his public identity and mobility, meeting expectations becomes paradoxically subversive:

> Growing up as a black kid from the projects, you can spend your whole life being misunderstood, followed around department stores, looked at funny, accused of crimes you didn't commit, accused of motivations you don't have, dehumanized—until you realize, one day, it's not about you. It's about perceptions people had long before you even walked onto the scene. The joke's on them because they're really just fighting phantoms of their own creation. Once you realize that, things get interesting. (55)

This perspective, extending back to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), enables potent satire, and "Ninety-Nine Problems" has certainly been praised for its satirical critique of racial profiling.[62] As Jay-Z's speaker describes a police stop in the song's second verse,

> I heard "Son do you know why I'm stopping you for?"
> "Cause I'm young and I'm black and my hat's real low?
> Do I look like a mind reader sir, I don't know
> Am I under arrest or should I guess some mo?"
> "Well you was doing fifty-five in a fifty-four
> License and registration and step out of the car
> Are you carrying a weapon on you, I know a lot of you are." (60)

The near rhymes that carry this verse add to its infectious quality, as does Jay-Z's ventriloquy of the police officer. The close coupling of play and pain in these lines and in the form they take lends poignancy and staying power to Jay-Z's critique even as that same combination in the song's title and refrain—even more mobile in public discourse and with a longer afterlife than his narrative—deflects that pain onto women, who are both invoked and discarded in the song's punch line. Jay-Z insists that his voice is appropriable: "when people hear me telling my stories . . . [t]hey hear it as their own voice" (295). But the message appropriated is not always harmless.

The song's debatable misogyny, however, hardly compares to the extremes reached by Eminem, whose commercial hits in 1999, 2000, and 2002 brought him as much praise as notoriety (Cobb 157–62; Mancini). Even William Jelani Cobb, whose *To the Break of Dawn* celebrates hip-hop's artistic achievements, excoriates Eminem's "anti-gay and violently misogynistic lyrics" (158): "In a genre that prides itself upon absurdist fantasy," he writes, "this is without a doubt the most perverse and twisted exploration I've ever heard" (159). Cobb acknowledges that Eminem's antiwoman rhetoric is coupled with "profound commentary" derived from "personal despair that will inevitably be cited as the source" of his misogyny (159). That despair, Cobb notes, speaks to the realities of Eminem's experience growing up in poverty even as it excuses views that validate others' oppression and elevates a white artist within a predominantly Black field.

But as in Jay-Z's verse, satire complicates this position, as does Eminem's use of multiple, overlapping personae. As the titles of his first three blockbuster albums—*The Slim Shady LP* (1999), *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000), and *The Eminem Show* (2002)—make clear, Eminem's stage name competes with his real name (Marshall Mathers) and fictional persona (Slim Shady) for the space of the lyric "I"—as do the various voices he ventriloquizes, including his fans, critics, and ex-wife. This self-conscious multiplication is made explicit in "The Real Slim Shady," which begins with a ventriloquized female voice asking, "Will the real Slim Shady please stand up?" Female-coded voices recur throughout the song, including "feminist women" who "love Eminem": "'Slim Shady, I'm sick of him / Look at him, walkin around, grabbin his you-know-what / Flippin the you-know-who,' 'Yeah, but he's so cute though.'" Like Jay-Z's, Eminem's close internal and off rhymes consolidate these contradictory statements and conflate the song's female voices with Slim Shady's, the embodiment of Eminem's most extreme misogyny. The fact of gendered

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ventriloquy is not in itself subversive, but the layering of the personae points to the performative quality of each identity—Slim Shady, Eminem, and Marshall Mathers included. "I guess there's a Slim Shady in all of us," the song provocatively concludes. Who should be held responsible for his worst views?

This tension is similarly present in Skelton's "Phyllyp Sparowe," an occasional poem written to commemorate the pet sparrow of a young woman, Jane Scrope, from a nunnery close to Skelton's church. Across more than eight hundred lines, Jane laments her limited capacity for expression even as close rhyme enables her to display the opposite, accommodating Latin and English, spiritual concerns and secular matters, lofty goals and her own lowly voice. The turn the poem takes midway through, however, immediately undercuts this reading. As Skelton interjects in Latin,

> Per me laurigerum
> Britanum Skeltonida vatem
> Hec cecinisse licet
> Ficta sub imagine texta,
> Cuius eris volucris,
> Prestanti corpore virgo. (lines 834–39)

> By me, Skelton, the laurel-crowned British poet, it is permitted to have sung these things, composed under a feigned likeness of the girl whose bird you will be, a maiden with a lovely body. (Sylvester 50)

Collapsing subject (Jane), speaker (Skelton laureate), author (Skelton), and reader (real-life Jane, for one) into one poetic voice, Skelton laces Jane's childlike rhymes with the male gaze in a move that even his contemporaries found disturbing.[63] Indeed, Skelton's treatment of Jane created enough controversy for Jane herself to rebuke the poem, such that Skelton was still defending it nearly two decades after the fact; as he wrote in "an adicyon" to the poem in 1523, "Alas, that goodly mayd, / Why shuld she be afrayde" (lines 1282–83)?[64] Despite the elaborately constructed quality of the poem, the slippage of subject and object, art and life, seems to have reinforced its real-world impact, Skelton's larger-than-life persona rendering his own desire in the act of representing another's.

Hip-hop's example suggests that close rhyme is directly implicated in this bid for control. Its all-encompassing sweep may leave Skelton's reader and Eminem's listener with the sense that their art is at once wondrously fantastical and troublingly real. Eminem's explicit criticism of public figures and personal relatives (such as his mother and ex-wife) has provoked both response tracks and lawsuits. And despite Skelton's insistence that his poem served "[r]ien que playsere" ("[n]othing but to please"; line 1267; Sylvester 64), the willful descent into pleasure formally enacted by rhyme represents, at the same time, the practice of power itself. It is the subversive pleasure evinced by hip-hop's use of close rhyme—and the verbal signifying, sonic exploration, and compulsive accumulation that close rhyme compels—that makes it a poetic expression of power and disempowerment, liberal play and illiberal control.

Hip-hop, moreover, sheds light on the ways in which the claim to marginality, evoked in Skelton's common-man persona and his complaints about unjust criticism, serves as both a hindrance and a resource. For many hip-hop artists, marginality is both a social and an industry-enforced reality. As Tricia Rose notes, hip-hop artists' commercial success does not necessarily equate with empowerment, leaving them exposed to exploitation, censorship, and even prosecution (*Black Noise* 3, 128–29; see Nielson and Dennis). At the same time, that marginality is often mitigated by other forms of privilege that enhance social mobility and legibility, whether that be class (Public Enemy), gender (Jay-Z), or race (Eminem). Speaking on behalf of marginalized publics, these artists also reconstruct marginality as a poetic resource, one that motivates powerful critique as well as defensive, exclusionary discourse. Skelton's verse works in a similar way, flexing close rhyme to its maximal impact, for better and for worse.

Coda: The Skeltonic versus Hip-Hop

Hip-hop's example offers at least one more provocation. What if, as some Skelton scholars have suggested, music is more integral to the Skeltonic than it now appears? Arthur F. Kinney has noted

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the influence of the speechlike rhythms and cadences of liturgical plainsong on the Skeltonic form; "Phyllyp Sparowe," for instance, begins with a call-and-response between plainsong and lyric: "*Pla ce bo*, / Who is there, who?" (lines 1–2). Kinney, in fact, reads the Skeltonic much as we might read hip-hop lyrics: "to speak or intone these variable lines we *need* the actual or inferred underlay of music" (49). Nan Cooke Carpenter has similarly suggested that music was central to Skelton's world and ventures that Skelton might have been educated as a chorister. It is possible that Skelton used psalmic fragments as an implied musical foundation: lacking the recording technology to fully incorporate (rather than notate) this underlay, Skelton's poetic project may remain incomplete, unassimilable to the burgeoning print culture of his day and unavailable for our full aesthetic appreciation.

Considering the musical dimensions of the Skeltonic opens up multiple directions for further study. Skelton's use of Latin might be read as an exploration of sound as much as sense; indeed, for many lay members of Skelton's rural parish, Latin would have provided more in the way of sound.[65] Joseph Schloss's study of sampling in hip-hop proves elucidating in this sense: while critics tend to assess hip-hop producers by the politics of the samples they employ, Schloss argues that aesthetic ends—how a track coheres and sounds—take precedence in the industry. Kyle Adams points out that because hip-hop's lyrics often trail the beat in the composition process, for many artists "the text supports the music" rather than the other way around (3). This inversion suggests that our understanding of hip-hop—and the Skeltonic—should similarly begin with sound.[66]

At the level of verse, this investment in sound manifests most clearly in rhyme, a formal feature with clear ties to oral traditions and musical performance (McKie 829). Close rhyme—particularly the surprising, difficult, voracious use of such—provides a complex aesthetic pleasure for both author and audience, derived from conjunctions made to seem both surprising and apparently inevitable. Functionally, rhyme also facilitates distribution, particularly within the hip-hop community, where lyrics have become "a form of currency" (Bradley and DuBois xxxiv). In the early years of hip-hop, the circulation of lyrics promised to validate the communities from which they emerged, even as the focus on rhyme placed MCs at the center of the broader hip-hop community. In the time since, that project has been complicated by the form's commercialization, which has come to compete with hip-hop's communal value and, at times, its artistic integrity. Even the drive to "keep it real," an ethos many understand to inoculate the form from commercial and hegemonic pressures, has resulted in the circulation of stereotypes outside hip-hop's foundational communities that disproportionately affect those whom hip-hop artists claim to represent, including themselves.[67] Rhyme's role in this crossover from art to life remains an important if understudied question.

If Skelton found a form that suited his various ends—inclusive and exclusionary—as he sought to render a space for himself in a changing world, so do hip-hop artists, in our day, continue to test the paradoxical poetics and politics of close rhyme, seeming only to gain where Skelton left off. The correspondence of their transgressive use of rhyme with Skelton's tells us little about influence and far more about the ways world and form collide to produce novel negotiations of language, power, and marginality. Literary form, in this sense, is neither sheltered from history nor continuous over time; rather, emerging across distinct periods and places, it should be understood to shape those disparate contexts in powerful if contradictory ways. Close rhyme, as the parallel examples of the Skeltonic and hip-hop attest, can do this work in radical, still-unfolding ways.

Notes

I thank Roland Greene for his generous comments and support throughout the writing and revision of this paper.

1. Bradley xiv.

2. Pope, "Imitations of Horace" 75; Mark Strand, qtd. in Caplan 14.

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3. George Puttenham, qtd. in Griffiths, *John Skelton* 159; Bill O'Reilly, qtd. in Reid.

4. Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, qtd. in Caplan 12; Fish 251.

5. Warton 78; Nelson 86; Rose, *Hip Hop Wars* 4.

6. Griffiths, "'Ende'" 717; Rose, *Black Noise* 61; I. Perry 1.

7. Wood 133; Caplan 50; "*Quarterly Review*" 112.

8. Cobb 61; Krims 50; Auden 182.

9. Jay-Z 54.

10. Lewis 136; Bradley 41.

11. The connection between hip-hop and Skeltonic verse has been made in passing; see Bradley 64–65; Brogan and Spaar 269; Simon.

12. "Skeltonic" began as an adjective, evolving from "Skeltonicall" in 1589 (Edwards 9) to "Skeltonic" in Alexander Dyce's authoritative 1843 edition of Skelton's works (Skelton, *Poetical Works* 147). The noun emerged in the twentieth century, as both "Skeltonics" (Ward and Waller 242) and "the Skeltonic" (Pyle).

13. Chang notes that "old-schoolers still passionately debate how congruent these youth movements in music, dance, and art really were" (*Can't Stop* 111). I use the term *hip-hop*, and occasionally *rap*, to index a capacious version of the musical form, including its lyrics, beat, and cultural reception.

14. Krims points to the "effusive" quality of contemporary hip-hop, where the rapper's idiosyncratic rhythm overruns, counterposes, or competes against the beat, a far cry from the neat, traditional couplets in the "sung" style of early rap (50; see 49–52).

15. See I. Perry 10–37 for hip-hop as a Black American art form.

16. Compare Charity; Krims 51 for this stylistic progression.

17. See Cardi B; Lamar for two contemporary examples.

18. Not all the critics I discuss affiliate with the "new formalist" label. Levinson's review of new formalism concludes with a note of skepticism about "the categorical thinking encouraged by such labels" (568). I follow Levine's lead in thinking through a range of formalist approaches in tandem and use the term *new formalisms* as an imperfect placeholder.

19. Proposed sources include Latin rhymed prose (Nelson), poems on the "Signs of Death" (Kinsman, "Skelton's 'Uppon a Deedmans Hed'" 103), liturgy (Kinney), and the Middle English lyric (Griffiths, "'Ende'").

20. Griffiths, *John Skelton* 1–3; Halpern 103–04; Segall 34.

21. Hadfield 24; Halpern 103–06; Heiserman 8–9. See Tonry on Skelton and the "new fifteenth century."

22. Griffiths points out that Skelton came to offer a voice and style for projects as various as mid-sixteenth-century Protestant reformation, late-sixteenth-century political critique, and seventeenth-century drama, demonstrating his belated arrival as an "emblem of poetic license" (*John Skelton* 16; see 158–84).

23. See Barnes 31–32, 35–41 on biographies and jestbooks that painted Skelton as a "lecherous buffoon" (35).

24. For versions of new formalism, see Best and Marcus; Love; Marcus et al.; Sedgwick.

25. See, in addition to Hayot, Bronstein on influence; Dimock on resonance and translation across "deep time" ("Theory," "Planetary Time," and *Through Other Continents*); Felski on "sociability" (166); Goldberg and Menon on anachronism; Levine on portability; and Robbins on genre.

26. Bronstein 7; Dimock, "Theory" 1061; Goldberg and Menon 1616; Hayot 740.

27. Hayot mentions "poetic features like rhyme" in a list of formal devices that might foster "nonperiodizing" study (743).

28. Tonry acknowledges that "Skelton has always made trouble for his readers" (722) but argues that his "awkwardness" is "produced just partially through Skelton's own poetics" (723).

29. Fish and Kendle each argue that the Skeltonic's uniqueness is overrated, both in terms of historical precedent (Kendle) and within Skelton's larger body of work (Fish). His reception history suggests otherwise; see also Gray 171.

30. Not all Renaissance critics viewed rhyme as an asset; see Attridge 89–113; Brown 103–38; N. Rhodes; Pask 513–18.

31. For hip-hop's influences, see Bradley 12–15, 80, 181–83; Chang, *Can't Stop*; Cobb 13–45; Gates, Foreword and *Signifying Monkey*; I. Perry 30–37, 58–60; Rose, *Black Noise* 55; Sanneh; Schloss 17. Many point to the centrality of percussion and call-and-response to hip-hop and other African and Afrodiasporic musical traditions; see Keyes 17–38; Snead 148–52. Hip-hop's origins in predominantly Black traditions have not dissuaded diverse audiences from enjoying and appropriating it; see Kitwana.

32. Bradley 14–15; Cobb 44.

33. For the prevalence of rhyme in folk traditions, see Caplan 62–63; Dance 474; Talley. For the technologies of hip-hop, see Bradley 155; Rose, *Black Noise* 55, 62–96; Wood. Gates locates sampling at the center of hip-hop's signifying ("Hip-Hop"). Imani Perry notes that many of hip-hop's central themes make it a unique musical form (8).

34. Alim; Bradley xi–xl; Jay-Z; McWhorter; Wood. For views of hip-hop as both literary and musical, see Cobb 6; I. Perry 33.

35. Bradley xvi; Jay-Z 10. Compare with Wimsatt and Beardsley.

36. Alim; Kajikawa 38.

37. See Jenkins for a critical intervention situating hip-hop within literary studies. Gates also applies his theory of signifying to both literary and musical forms ("Hip-Hop").

38. For more on the socio- and geopolitical developments that shaped hip-hop, see Gates, Foreword; Rose, *Black Noise* 21–61; Wood 133–34. For a comprehensive history, see Chang, *Can't Stop*.

39. Caplan points out that hip-hop artists' relationship to rhyme stands "at odds with that of most contemporary print-based poets" (4), who view rhyme as "old-fashioned and nostalgic" (6); however, he also highlights a handful of contemporary poets who have followed hip-hop in turning to rhyme (103–38).

40. Traub, responding to "the new unhistoricism in queer studies," questions the efficacy of analogy as a critical frame for the field. Gates, by contrast, introduces his seminal work on signifying in African American literature with the frame of analogy: "Anyone who analyzes black literature must do so as a

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comparativist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black" (*Signifying Monkey* xxiv).

41. Repetition rests at the foundation of hip-hop scholarship; Snead's reading of the "cut" in Black cultural forms is a frequently cited example. Repetition is also central to Gates's theory of signifying.

42. For the "outlaw" and "badman" traditions, see I. Perry 102–16. For examples of reactionary responses, see Gore; Will. For a rebuttal, see Eminem's "White America," released on his Grammy-winning album *The Eminem Show* (2002). More recently, Kendrick Lamar samples a critique from Fox News's Geraldo Rivera in "DNA" from his album *DAMN.* (2017), which won the Pulitzer Prize.

43. See Baker 33–60 for "noise" and public space.

44. Where applicable, I have followed Bradley and DuBois's theory of transcription; see xlvi–xlvii.

45. Hip-hop's commercialization has also coincided with a marginalization of women in the field; see Rose, *Black Noise* 146–82 for the importance of Black women rappers to hip-hop's development. For a recent review of hip-hop feminism, see Halliday and Payne.

46. Compare this description of rhyme's workings with Jakobson 232–39 on the use of "equivalence" in signification.

47. See also Jay-Z 243.

48. See also Potter 81.

49. Kezar argues that Skelton anticipated publishing the poem in print and therefore envisioned a broader audience than manuscript circulation allowed (40).

50. Cooper 152–53; Greene 233; Kinsman, "Skelton's 'Colyn Cloute'" 20–21. Kinsman notes, "The coupling of 'Colyn' (rustic) with 'Clout' (rag) may have been a colloquial one" (21).

51. Greene; W. Rhodes 515–18.

52. Blanchard; Kinsman, "Skelton's 'Colyn Cloute'" 17–18.

53. Hip-hop's "voice from the margins" is a long-standing trope; see I. Perry 29–32; Rose, *Black Noise* 1–20.

54. See Shelby 252–73 on hip-hop's "impure dissent."

55. See Jay-Z 70.

56. See Bailey 50–52 for more on the battle rap tradition. See Chang, *Can't Stop* 67–125 on the individualism and collectivism of early hip-hop crews.

57. See Jay-Z 26.

58. Lewis 138–39; Paster 51–52; Woodbridge 234–35.

59. Herman; Kelly. Lecky sees in "Elynour Rummynge" an "inclusive poetics."

60. Chang, *Can't Stop* 283–95, 327, 349. While women have been more likely than men to criticize sexism in their lyrics (Rose, *Black Noise* 146–82), the prevalence of misogyny in the rap industry has paved the way for a hypersexualization of women MCs, from Lil' Kim to Nicki Minaj. See I. Perry 155–90.

61. I. Perry 122–30; Rose, *Black Noise* 15.

62. See also Ellison 55.

63. See Kezar 37–38 for Jane's response to "Phyllyp Sparowe." For feminist responses, see Daileader 398; Schibanoff 839. Fish, alternatively, locates the reader's discomfort in the intrusion of Skelton's "aureate voice" (116).

64. For one early critique of "Phyllyp Sparowe," see Barclay.

65. See Gray 186–96 for Skelton's attachment to songs and "nonsense" verse.

66. See Weheliye for a view of hip-hop at the intersection of Black studies and sound studies.

67. I. Perry 86–87; Dyson 5. Nielson and Dennis demonstrate that amateur hip-hop artists are also increasingly vulnerable to criminal prosecution.

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Abstract: At the turn of the sixteenth century, John Skelton left a strange legacy to the English literary canon: a verse form characterized solely by short lines and long rhyme sequences. This formal innovation, a species of close rhyme now called "the Skeltonic," has puzzled Skelton's interlocutors for centuries, leaving him a liminal figure within literary history. But if Skelton was an anomaly, the Skeltonic does not stand alone within the English-language literary canon. American hip-hop, one of the most formally innovative, commercially successful, and contentious poetic forms of our day, foregrounds a style and ethos that in many ways picks up where Skelton left off. Hip-hop, like the Skeltonic, requires the explanatory force of its own context, and yet its remarkable, persistent, historically dissonant commitment to rhyme suggests a striking formal parallel with Skelton's verse, one that offers transhistorical insight into the performative poetics and paradoxical politics of close rhyme.

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