

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY: INVENTIONS OF A BARBAROUS
AGE: CONTEMPORARY RHYME IN POETRY

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Dogwatch

R. S. Gwynn

Measure Press, 2014

122 pages; hardcover, \$20.00

The Second Sex

Michael Robbins

Penguin, 2014

64 pages; paperback, \$18.00

Imperial Bender

Amanda Smeltz

Typecast, 2013

70 pages; paperback, \$15.00

New Poems

Ben Mazer

Pen & Anvil, 2013

120 pages; paperback, \$11.95

Rhyme, argues Milton, defending the blank verse of *Paradise Lost*, is “no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem...but the invention of a barbarous age,” and the poet’s freedom from rhyme is “an ancient liberty recovered...from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming.”¹ Times have changed: try thinking of a contemporary poet who has felt the need to defend the lack of rhyme in his or her poetry and odds are pretty strong you’ll come up blank. Indeed, it’s the rhymers who are more likely to feel the need for a defense. The

¹ John Milton, *Selected Longer Poems and Prose*, ed. Tony Davies (New York: Routledge, 1992), 33.

best defense, of course, is a good poem in rhyme—and if we look, we begin to find these in many different quadrants of the poetry world.

But there are rhymes and there are rhymes, and it's worthwhile considering what some of the recent scholarship has to say about the differences between them, especially if we hope to understand the various ends to which contemporary poets have put rhyme. Perhaps it's not coincidental that the most provocative critical thoughts about rhyme in recent years have come from poets, notably Stephen Burt and Anthony Madrid.

Burt looks at rhyme primarily in terms of its function, making a general distinction between what he calls "background" and "foreground" rhymes. For most of the history of rhymed poetry in English, Burt writes in his essay "Cornucopia, or, Contemporary American Rhyme," rhymes were not meant to pull focus away from other elements of the poem. Rhyme was one element in the "metrical contract," an agreement between poets and readers that poems would be more tightly organized and musical than prose.² Individual rhymes, though, "would not usually draw more attention than other aspects of the verse."³ Indeed, they were part of a norm—a background—against which deviations became more visible. They were the settings in which verbal gems were placed, not the gems themselves. When they were too ingenious—or, alternately, too worn and cloying—they pulled focus and failed to serve their vital if unglamorous function.⁴ Burt cites Robert Graves's analogy between good rhymes and good servants as an example of this theory of rhyme's function: good rhymes, says Graves, "are the good servants whose presence at the dinner-table gives the guests a sense of opulent security; never awkward or over-clever.... You can trust them not to interrupt the conversation."⁵ Rhyming "moon" with "June," in this view, is much like spilling a bowl of soup in a diner's lap; while rhyming "intellectual" with "hen-pecked you all" is more a matter of spending far too long explaining

2 Stephen Burt, "Cornucopia, or, Contemporary American Rhyme," in *The Monkey and the Wrench: Essays into Contemporary Poetics*, ed. Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher (Akron, OH: Akron University Press, 2011), 61.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 61. From Robert Graves, *Collected Writings on Poetry, Volume One*, ed. Paul O'Prey (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 6–7.

the choice of appetizer, or making an unctuous compliment about the diner's choice of necktie.

When rhyme forces itself onto our attention, it pushes itself into the foreground. The move may be propelled by all sorts of different fuel: rhymes may jump forward "because they are polysyllabic, because they employ proper nouns...because the words they use are the oddest in their respective lines" or for any number of other reasons.⁶ What matters is that it demands attention: rather than being part of an accepted contract, it comes across as a violation of some kind, making the verse seem "consciously artificial—ornamental, or antiquary, or ironic (even sarcastic), or willed, or faux-naïve."⁷ Most of you wouldn't want this kind of rhyme serving you dinner on a big night out, though you'd probably enjoy it as a cabaret performer.

A contract, of course, has two parties, and Burt's theory of rhyme isn't so much about the qualities of rhymes in isolation, but about the way they interact with readerships. The percentage of published American poems that rhyme is smaller than it was even a few decades ago⁸—fewer and fewer readers take rhyme as a norm—with the result that it is harder and harder for rhyme to fulfill a background function. Foreground rhyme, therefore, "has become, for *most* American poets now, the only kind that we can use: its possibilities have expanded immensely, while background rhyme has become, though not unheard of, scarce, and extremely hard to use well."⁹

While Burt focuses on the function of rhyme in a shifting context, Anthony Madrid gives us a bold, broad history of English rhyme. In "The Warrant for Rhyme" he tells a story of rhyme's transformation from the Renaissance to the present day, centering on a "rhyme shift" that quietly remade English poetry over the course of the seventeenth century. Before this shift, we find a much greater emphasis on rhymes that bear a semantic resemblance as well as a sonic one: "cherry" and "berry," for example, or "mother" and "brother." After the shift, though, such rhymes occur with greatly reduced frequency. By 1660 or so, Madrid argues,

⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

...serious poets unconsciously resisted using rhyme pairs wherein the two words bore to each other any strong and essential semantic link. This resistance sometimes reached a pitch of utter exclusion in cases where the words in the rhyme pair were perceived on some level as participating in a semantic algebra of equivalence or opposition...whole categories of rhyme were decommissioned. In particular, rhyme pairs wherein the words are near-synonyms or near-antonyms were to be avoided. Thus, {*moan* | *groan*} would have been counterintuitive to an Augustan poet, because the two terms are near-synonyms. {*Sad* | *glad*} would have seemed undesirable because the words are opposites.¹⁰

Since the move away from semantic/sonic combinations in rhyme happens in poetic practice without ever becoming the subject of a manifesto-like polemical essay in the period, the rationale remains evasive, although Madrid advances a hypothesis that we might take as a description of the birth of what Burt calls background rhyme. “[T]he implied purpose of rhyme” after the shift, says Madrid, “was to affect the audience in the same way that music does: not by encoding information, but by manipulating the sensual apparatus of the body.”¹¹ The hypothesis, then, is that poets sought “to exclude rhymes they expected would call attention to themselves, thus disturbing the operation of the music.”¹²

For Madrid, this system began to break down in the nineteenth century, beginning with the comic masterpieces of Lord Byron. In Byron we see the first poet to work, not intermittently or marginally, but in his great works quite consistently, with rhymes that willfully violate the norms of decorum. He does so not by turning back the clock to the Renaissance emphasis on semantically significant rhymes, but by turning to a kind of rhyme that insistently “demonstrates inventiveness and originality.”¹³

This turn to eccentricity prepared the ground for the diminished role of rhyme in modern poetry. The flashy virtuosity of Byronic rhyme inevitably led the reader to ask, “Are not all these crazy rhymes a joke on poetry itself?”¹⁴ The ultimate effect of Byron and those he influenced

10 Anthony Madrid, “The Warrant for Rhyme.” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012 (ProQuest 3517172), 13.

11 *Ibid.*, 20.

12 *Ibid.*.

13 *Ibid.*, 114.

was to help undermine the old contract about rhyme between poet and reader, giving us a “demotion of rhyme from an effect that characterized a given poem as a whole to a local and unpredictable effect whose pretensions to power were sharply limited.”¹⁵ We find ourselves in the world of Burt’s foreground rhymers, with rhyme coming across as artificial, ornamental, willed, ironic, or faux-naïve. Madrid laments this situation, claiming that while rhyme culture never disappeared among songwriters, in literary poetry rhyme will, in the absence of some champion, “languish in a perpetual catarrh, and students of English poetry will have to strain hard to lend half of our greatest poets the sympathetic ear they deserve.”¹⁶ “When, oh when,” Madrid seems to call out in the wilderness, “will the covenant be revived?”

One answer to Madrid’s question is that the old metrical contract, in which rhyme draws no more focus than any other element of a poem, has never gone away—for a minority. It is from this minority that R. S. Gwynn emerges, and to this minority that he, for the most part, speaks. Make no mistake about it: when it comes to meter, to rhyme, and to the traditional classical and Christian codes once universally familiar to the readers of literary poetry in English, Gwynn is a master. He knows the functions of the traditional forms and modes—the sonnet, the ballad, the elegy, the satire. He respects them, as a true craftsman will, and he turns them to their time-hallowed purposes. And yet there are quadrants on the map of American poetry where his work struggles to be taken seriously—in no small measure, one suspects, because he writes for those who take the old “metrical contract” for granted, for those who do not recoil at the rhyming of “all” and “call”—the first rhyming couplet in his latest collection, *Dogwatch*.

When we look at where many of the poems in *Dogwatch* have appeared—in such traditional rhyme-and-meter friendly journals as *Able Muse*, *The Hudson Review*, *Light* (formerly *Light: A Quarterly of Light Verse*), *The Sewanee Review*, and *Measure*—we get confirmation that Gwynn’s primary audience is more predisposed to recognize the old style “metrical contract” than is the American poetry world as a whole. Indeed, Gwynn is a habitué of the West Chester University

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.