

The Myth of an Oral Style in Chaucer's Poetry

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Walter J. Ong's groundbreaking study of orality altered many peoples' views of oral communication and the different implied modes of thought inherent between orality and literacy. Most importantly for medievalists, Ong suggested that such elements as rhetoric, formulae, name-calling, and the description of physical behaviour (often in the form of fighting) were typical of oral texts, and less often found in written forms of communication (Ong 6, 44, 45, 46, and 95). He also argued that oral communication is more interactive and social than written communication (101), and although some may disagree with his argument that a "writer's audience is always a fiction" (102) whereas an oral poet's audience is not, I doubt many would find fault in the suggestion that oral communication is more intimate than written communication, particularly in situations where the person transmitting the oral text and the

original producer of the oral text are the same. The implications for studying the pragmatic layers of an oral text are therefore considerable—authors can take advantage of the greater interactivity of oral texts by both referring to pragmata in the text and by more readily suggesting immediate social change. While Ong suggests that an oral poet's audience is in some sense more real than a writer's audience, it would be more accurate to suggest that orality encourages a faster interchange between author and audience; texts in an oral culture will ultimately lead to greater variety not due to the poet's individual genius, but due to audience participation and response.

Ong focuses almost solely on what he calls "primary orality"—a culture effectively without the written word whatsoever. Thus he does not consider the theoretical implications of "secondary orality," or a culture in which orality becomes more self-conscious after the adoption of writing and print (Ong 136). The question of orality in the Middle Ages, and in fourteenth-century England, are complicated not only by the existence of literacy and the proliferation of texts written for private reading,¹⁾ but also by the fact that residues of orality remain in written texts; oral markers such as "as I said before" often remain in written texts written for audiences because this phrase had become an idiomatic recursive pointer (Bäumli 31-49). A further complication comes from the fact that orality sometimes exists as a fiction within narrative texts, and the orality of a text and the verisimilitude of the orality of a fictional oration within a written text can easily be confused. Reported speech in a text written for reading audiences, for example, reflects an author's attempt to reconstruct the language of oral communication even if the text was never intended to be read aloud. We may call this an "oral style," and is the hallmark of verisimilar

1) On the development of silent reading in the Middle Ages, see Saenger; specific to England is Clanchy, esp. Chs. 1-3.

dialogues in contemporary literature.

The pitfalls in searching for oral markers within a text do not end here, because the distinction between oral and written texts has never been clear-cut. For example, where does a conference presentation stand within the distinction? Is it a text for readers, to be published after the fact, or a text for hearers at the conference itself? The term "prelection" has been used to refer to the oral performance of a written text (Coleman, "Caxton"; Green), and such a "transitory" oral circumstance demonstrates that sometimes there is no distinction between an oral and written communicative circumstance because a text is written for both readers and hearers at the same time. In this situation, the distinction between oral discourse and an "oral style" is hazy at best.

This is important for Middle English poetry, since we have known for a long time that these texts were often written for both oral and written transmission. Ruth Crosby, in 1936 and 1938, suggested that many texts in the Middle Ages were orally performed and that Chaucer orally performed his poems to a mixed audience of hearers. Her evidence comes almost entirely from markers of orality that are considered non-diegetic moments of otherwise fictional texts:

Now herkneth, as I have yow seyde,
What that I mette, or I abreyd (*House of Fame* 109-110)

Now herkneth with a good entencioun,
For now wil I gon streght to my matere,
In which ye may the double sorwes here
Of Troilus in lovyng of Criseyde (*Troilus and Criseyde* 1.52-55)

But herkeneth, ye that speke of kindness

(*Legend of Good Women* F.665)

So yive hem joye that hyt here

Of alle that they dreme to-yere (*House of Fame* 83-84)²⁾

The evidence for oral performance has led to near-universal agreement amongst Chaucerians that at least Chaucer's early poems were written for oral performance.³⁾ More recently, a seminal study by Joyce Coleman has demonstrated that all of Chaucer's poetry was performed orally and the same could be said for the aureate Middle English tradition.⁴⁾ While the historical fact of Middle English oral performance has become accepted by Chaucerians, little analysis has gone into what this complex oral/literary matrix means for the stylistic constructions of Chaucer's poetry and our understanding of Chaucer's "oral style."

To consider the style of orality, we must first determine at what point in the production of the text orality becomes a factor. Franz Bäuml suggests that a distinction must be made between the process of composition and the transmission of a text. He believed elements of orality—most notably the use of formulae—function differently in the composition and performance of a text, and different expectations are held in different situations by different hearers (Bäuml 31-49). Therefore, an audience who hears a written text being read aloud will respond differently than an audience in the type of primary orality

2) All quotations of Chaucer's texts are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

3) See Bronson, Griffin, Spearing, and Strohm, who have assumed the orality of Chaucer's love-visions.

4) Coleman provides a comprehensive study of markers of orality in Middle English poetry from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. See "Interactive Parchment."

circumstance that Alfred Lord and Milman Parry studied so closely. Also, since Walter J. Ong's theory is directed at circumstances of primary orality, it is not helpful for a study of the Middle English period, in which texts were written to be read aloud.

Bäumli provides an important distinction between three types of post-primary orality: texts performed in a literate culture, written texts based in an oral tradition, and written texts that use oral features as a stylistic device. Charles Dickens, who was well known for giving public readings of his novels, enacted the first type, while a novel with direct speech is an obvious example of the third type. *Beowulf* as it survives in manuscript form may be considered an example of the second type.

This distinction suggests that many medieval texts which have been traditionally presumed to be oral merely use oral features as stylistic devices or have residues of orality which are a remnant of an oral tradition preceding it. Studies of the early novel have shown how such residues of orality may remain in texts written in the eighteenth century, raising the question of how "residual" Chaucer's poetry is or might be.⁵) If a novel like *Fanny Hill* retains oral residue, despite being written for a reading audience, how can we know that Chaucer's poetry is not very much the same—a literary corpus that bears the markings of a residual oral culture?

The distinction Bäumli makes between oral composition and transmission implies that an oral device employed in a literary text for stylistic purposes would remind a reader of orality, perhaps in a nostalgic or archaic usage. In other words, there is a difference—and a discernable one—between oral markers used to remind an audience of orality and oral markers which have

5) For a full study of this phenomenon in eighteenth-century literature, see Brönnimann-Egger.

a stylistic effect if performed orally. Bertrand H. Bronson has demonstrated that Chaucer's rhetoric is inherently bound in oral performance, in that Chaucer utilizes topical allusions and the use of repetitive transitions—most notably in *Troilus and Criseyde*—to gently remind the hearing audience of what has previously transpired; such repetitions are, to a reader, unnecessary and occasionally unfavorable (Bronson 10-39); but if Chaucer's statement that he was going to perform all five books of *Troilus and Criseyde* in one setting is a reflection of an actual method of textual transmission, then such repetitious transitions are not only helpful, but are also a method of helping the hearer move from scene to scene. Such elements of orality, then, are bound not only in the composition, but also in the performance of the text.

Many Chaucerians, either in response to Bäuml's suggestion or not, have examined how orality exists in Chaucer's texts both stylistically and thematically and have mostly discovered something more than residual orality. In his examination of Chaucer's style, Derek Brewer concludes that Chaucer's frequent use of metonymy, hyperbole, formulae, sententiousness, and the repetition of key phrases with variation is an affectation of an oral style (Brewer, "Poetic Style"). Brewer also polarizes the oral world and the literate into separate realms of communication; for him, Chaucer presents literature in the oral style in an attempt to blend "the new world of literate thought into the old but always current world of personal direct speech and relationship" (227). This argument fits Ong's evolutionary model, which is the basis for Brewer's study.

Such stylistic elements, it would seem, go beyond residue, as they are not the unconscious or semi-conscious applications of oral features to a literary text. These are stylistic choices that have an inherent literary value that Chaucer is aware of and utilizes within his poetry. Brewer suggests that oral

features are only to be found in Chaucer's poetry and not in his prose texts, which are written for a reading audience, again pointing out the absence of formulas, set phrases, wordplay, hyperbole, oaths, repetition with variation, and kinetic imagery (Brewer, "Orality and Literacy").

In this, Brewer's assumption that orality in Chaucer is a stylistic device consciously employed to accompany oral performance leads him astray. Later studies have demonstrated that Chaucer wrote even his prose works for both a reading and hearing audience. In his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Chaucer addresses "every discret persone that redith or herith this litel tretys" (Prologue 41); in the *Retraction*, Chaucer addresses the audience of the *Parson's Tale* as "alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede" (X 1081). The oral features of the *Tale of Melibee* suggest that it, alongside these two lengthy prose works, was also written for oral and textual transmission (Foster 409-430). If these prose works were written for hearers as well as readers yet lack the various stylistic features of orality suggested by Brewer, we are led to two likely conclusions: metonymy, hyperbole, formulae, etc. are features of residual orality within Chaucer's poetry, or they are not reliable predictive indicators of an oral work and are not related to orality at all. In either case, it is more useful to consider orality as a mode of transmission rather than as a stylistic affectation in relation to Chaucer's textual corpus, whether poetry or prose.

A return to a very old approach to Chaucer's markers of orality may be useful. While Chaucerians such as Brewer examined how Chaucer's style mimics or affects oral transmission, Ruth Crosby has examined how Chaucer's language reflects the historical fact of oral performance. Studies of medieval preaching have suggested a similar context for Middle English sermons. These were both publicly read aloud to the community and later studied in private. These sermons had both a didactic religious purpose and a communicative

function to create a cohesive cultural identity.⁶⁾ Most often—as in the case of preaching at Paul’s Cross in London in the fourteenth century—these sermons served either as a form of social control or social change. Mendicant and anti-mendicant sermons were given at this site, and much of the future of the church in England was settled by the sermons given in the vernacular to a non-noble public (Horner 261-282). That these classes *heard* stories more than read is not in dispute, even if the extent to which they could read is.

The transition from orality to literacy that occurred in this era seems to have been piecemeal and not a march towards progress, but an organic development in the various means of textual transmission. Significantly, literate people often listened to texts being read aloud. An evolutionary theoretical model like Ong’s does not explain this (nor does it, for that matter, explain the popularity of audiobooks in our own era), whereas we may benefit from a perception of literacy that does not stigmatize the oral transmission of stories and its companion notion of literate language being somehow different from oral language.

In the Middle Ages, this distinction between oral and written language is vague; many medieval readers read aloud to themselves, as evidenced by complaints of loud scriptoria (Saenger 97), and medieval theories of language emphasized the symbolic relationship between written letters and the sounds they represent. Thus Isidore of Seville argues for a linear relationship in which words are sounds that can be represented by letters that can be translated back into the sounds they represent by readers: “Litterae autem dictae quasi legiterae, quod iter legentibus praestent, vel quod in legendo iterentur,” “And letters get their name from *legitera*, because they show the way for readers;

6) For example, see the studies in Hamesse et al.

in other words, because they are repeated in reading" (*Etymologiae* 1.3.1-2). For Boethius, the sound of a word and the letters representing that sound are parts of a longer chain, beginning with the thing itself (the signified, in modern parlance), thought, the sounding of the thought into a word (a signifier), and finally letters themselves, which are representations of the sounds of thought:

igitur haec sint quattuor: res, intellectus, vox, littera, rem concipit intellectus, intellectum vero voces designant, ipsas vero voces litterae significant.

there are thus four things: the thing, intellect, the voice, the letter; the intellect conceives of the thing, the intellect truly designates a voice to the thing, and then letters signify the voice. (*Commentarium in Librum Aristotelis*, 1:37)⁷⁾

The concept here is very close to a Saussurian structuralism that affirms language's symbolic, representative nature. Medieval structuralism suggests that letters are reflections of sounds instead of thought themselves; thus to reach closer to the author's thought, one must unlock the voice represented on the page. It is unsurprising that vocalization and oral performance of texts would be common in the Middle Ages as a way of coming closer to the author's true intention.

This unlocking of Chaucer's voice is a *topos* for manuscript illumination in the famous image of Chaucer performing to an audience in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 61, on f.1v. Here, Chaucer is depicted reading aloud from a text to an audience of noblemen and women; such an image is obviously idealized both in the vivid use of colors, the garden setting, and the

7) Quoted in Irvine, 856n.17.

large castle in the background. Interestingly, few of his audience members seem to be listening closely, and, as V.A. Kolve observes:

Chaucer [is here] reciting to a courtly company in the grounds of a castle...here we see him concerned not with the transmission of his work to a predicated posterity, but with its publication to his own contemporaries: the poem as process, as literary event, in a social setting. (12)

Long ago, Margaret Galway attempted to find historical figures in the audience depicted here, thus assuming that this image was a close proximity to historical fact (Galway 161-177). Any such attempts have since been discredited (Salter 23 and Pearsall 1977: 68-74), and the image was seen as an attempt “to create the impression of a real occasion” (Pearsall 1977: 69). If the setting and audience are idealized, we must treat the situation with suspicion.

To consider whether Chaucer would have performed his poetry in this way, we must keep in mind that this image was produced in the early fifteenth century, a rather enigmatic period in which book reading and production was in flux, but in a very slow flux at that. Joyce Coleman has argued that public reading exists well into the late fifteenth century (Coleman, “Interactive Parchment” 63-79), and that Caxton’s printing press did not mark an immediate change from oral reception to silent reading; Caxton himself comments on the oral reception of his books (Coleman, “Caxton” 83-90). Thus the act of prelection, or of reading aloud a written text, was not an idealization for that fifteenth-century artist who made this image of Chaucer. Other manuscript representations of public speaking—in these cases, preaching—reflect a scene comparable—if less impressively executed—to that of the Corpus Christi frontispiece of Chaucer. These are also idealized depictions, but the idealization

we here find is religious and not literary in nature; there is thus no need to assume or suspect that these depictions of prelection are, in fact, anachronisms, especially when we have ample evidence of preaching to a hearing audience in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. Thus, while we can doubt the historical veracity of the Corpus Christi image, there is no reason to doubt that some form of oral reception similar to this image actually occurred in Chaucer's lifetime.

The Anachronism of an Oral Style

The distinction between a written and oral style is largely dependent upon an assumption that the modes of written and oral transmission are disparate and distinct. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries this is often true, as is reflected in the widespread use of the phrasal verb "to read aloud," distinguished from "to read" which is implicitly a silent, individual action. However, medieval perceptions of reading do not distinguish between vocal and non-vocal methods of transmission. For Chaucer, the term "read" was used not only to refer to silent reading, but also to prelection to an audience and to reading aloud to oneself. In *Book of the Duchess* and *Parliament of Fowls* we see the verb "read" being used to refer to reading to oneself, although in both cases it is unclear whether the reader (in both cases the narrator) vocalizes these words or not:

Upon my bed I sat upright
 And bad oon reche me a book
 A romaunce, and he it me tok
 To rede and drive the night away (*Book of the Duchess* 47-50)

I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,
 To reede upon, and yit I rede alway. (*Parliament of Fowls* 695-696)

It is likely that these are instances of silent reading, if we accept that the narrator of each poem is the same rhetorical persona that is also the first-person narrator of the *House of Fame*, since the eagle of that poem tells us that the narrator reads silently:

And, also domb as any stoon,
 Thou sittest at another book
 Thy fully daswed ys thy look (*House of Fame* 655-657)

In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, we find the verb being used definitively to refer to reading aloud to oneself:

Upon a nyght Jankyn, that was oure sire,
 Redde on his book, as he sat by the fire
 (*Wife of Bath's Prologue* 713-714)

Tho redde he me how Sampson loste his heres
 (*Wife of Bath's Prologue* 721)

In this second passage, we find the verb “redde” taking a prepositionless dative “me” (here referring to the Wife of Bath) to refer to the act of reading out loud; the lack of a preposition suggests that it was common in Middle English for the verb “read” to take not only a direct object but also an indirect object as an audience, much as “told” functions in present-day English; a more comprehensive corpus analysis of Middle English texts could decide this matter more definitively.

The connection between Middle English “read” and modern English “tell” is unsurprising, since in her prologue the Wife of Bath uses these verbs interchangeably to refer to her husband's act of reading his antifeminist tales out loud:

He tolde me eek for what occasioun
Amphiorax at Thebes loste his lyf. (*Wife of Bath's Prologue* 740-741)

Of Lyvia told he, and of Lucye (*Wife of Bath's Prologue* 747)

Thanne tolde he me how oon Latumyus
Compleyned unto his felawe Arrius (*Wife of Bath's Prologue* 757)

Of latter date, of wyves hath he red (*Wife of Bath's Prologue* 765)

It seems that, for Chaucer, “reading” was either a vocal or non-vocal activity, which undermines modern distinctions between a world of oral communication and a world of texts.

The juxtaposition between Jankyn and the narrator of the love visions is a surprising and unusual one; the narrator is often seen as a bumbling simpleton who does not understand the complex symbols and signification of the courtly love world that he describes.⁸⁾ Jankyn is similarly unequipped to appreciate the gravitas of his texts, as he seems blissfully unaware of the offensiveness of antifeminist tales to a robust and strong woman like the Wife of Bath. In the case of the narrator, the result is usually comic, while in Jankyn's case, the inability to appreciate the rhetorical impact of his reading

8) This traditional view begins with Kittredge, 50 and has remained popular; see, for example, Nevo, 1 - 9, Bahr, 43 - 59, and Shoeck, 127-128.

material results in domestic violence and disruption. In this, perhaps we can find a comical didacticism—one should read silently, lest one offend eavesdroppers.

There is an additional component to Jankyn's vocalized reading that the Wife of Bath ignores. Her repeated emphasis on Jankyn's *telling* suggests that she is his primary audience, when the physical description of the setting suggests that Jankyn is reading more to himself than to her. At line 714, we are told that Jankyn would read his book every night "as he sat by the fire;" had the Wife of Bath been sitting with him, we would expect a first person plural pronoun here. It seems likely, then, that Jankyn was reading to himself at least as much as to the Wife of Bath, and this would be unsurprising in light of the understanding of written words expressed by Boethius and Isidore of Seville. When Jankyn reads aloud, he releases both the sense of the work and the voice of the author. The Wife of Bath does not hear the author's voice, but Jankyn's, who becomes a conduit for the voice of "clericalism" (Hanna 252). The prologue to the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the tale itself can be seen as responses to this voice, in which the voice of the Wife of Bath combats the voice of the antifeminist clerical tradition. When the Friar complains that the Wife of Bath tells "a long preamble of a tale" (III. 831), we hear the clerical voice attempt to shut down the voice of feminism.

Despite Jankyn's politically odious reading tastes, he has an apparent love for the voices of authors. The narrator does not seem to share this delight, since he reads silently and constantly seems to underappreciate what he reads, such as his lacklustre response to the story of Alcyone and Ceyx. This story of passionate love disrupted by a tragic death becomes the narrator's inspiration to sacrifice his bedding in order to cure insomnia; Kay Gilliland Stevenson wryly observes that the narrator's use of the story is like "reading

Homer to learn about chariot-driving or physic" (Stevenson 4). This is not to say that the narrator dislikes reading, but that he does not appreciate the voice of authors, and reads for mere subject matter. Such obtuse reading is appropriate for the figure who tells the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the long-winded *Tale of Melibee*.

Also unlike Jankyn, the narrator is not a jolly clerk; he demonstrates a scholarly attitude towards poetry and love and is often a poor reader, which is why he misunderstands the Man in Black, does not appreciate the glimpses of heaven offered by the eagle in the *House of Fame*, and has failed the God of Love in the *Legend of Good Women*. In the end, Chaucer suggests, the narrator must return to a life of meticulous study of love and poetry, alone, silent, and outside the social sphere.

We can also take this juxtaposition as a representation of different types of reading: one private and one social. The eagle's chastisement of the narrator suggests that his method of private, silent reading is unusual, and that it would be better for him to experience his texts socially, if not to give up texts entirely and enjoy the world of real experience. Modern readers who expect Chaucer's poetry to be directed at private, silent readers are similarly ignoring the larger social aspect of public reading that was the norm for fourteenth-century England.

Thus we can assume that silent reading is a new and minority mode of textual communication for Chaucer, although he used the verb *read* to refer to both the silent reading to oneself and the reading aloud to oneself and others. He did not always use an adverb to qualify whether he refers to silent reading or prelection, and so we must assume that the division between orality and literacy is never clear-cut in Chaucer's works. While the most logical conclusion regarding the love-visions is that they were orally performed, we can not be

certain that even the *Canterbury Tales* were written for a solely reading audience, and that Chaucer's use of the verb read has, at any given moment, prelectic connotations we might miss. In the age of transition from orality to literacy, any text had the potential to be subject to a public reading, and we cannot assume authors did not keep in mind the potential oral publication of their works. Thus, from a stylistic point of view, even the *Canterbury Tales*, although obviously a work of transition from orality to literacy, is written as a text to be *read* either silently or aloud, and it is a modern imposition of an oral/written opposition to insist on an oral style in a literary text of fourteenth-century England. In Chaucer's age a text needed to be versatile, ready for both written and oral publication, as audiences could request or demand either at any given time. Knowing this, authors as shrewd as Chaucer probably used rhetorical and stylistic features suited to both oral and written performance interchangeably. The concept of a stylistic adaptation of orality to create a mood of nostalgia or archaism is misplaced in the Middle Ages. A more accurate description of the transition would be to discuss stylistic adaptations of literacy to texts which were in the so-called intermediate phase of orality and which would be subject to both silent and vocalized readings.

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The Myth of an Oral Style in Chaucer's Poetry

Abstract

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Geoffrey Chaucer is generally recognized as a specifically *literary* author; he is called the “father of English poetry” and seen as the first of the holy trinity of English literature, comprised also of William Shakespeare and John Milton. However, Chaucer (like Shakespeare) wrote his poetry not for literary readers, but for oral performance in front of a hearing audience. This historical fact, although acknowledged, has been largely ignored in studies of Chaucer's style, which is seen as containing a type of oral residue or as an affectation of speech as Chaucer ambitiously looks forward to a future of readers silently reading his poetry. In this article I argue that, since all of Chaucer's works were written for hearing audiences, it is anachronistic to assume that he made any distinction whatsoever between the reading and hearing of his literary works, and that his style is best understood as a versatile adaptation of language to suit both silent and vocalized readings of his texts.

Key Words

Geoffrey Chaucer, Orality, Oral Residue, Structuralism, *Book of the Duchess*, *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Canterbury Tales*

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