

THE ORAL PERFORMANCE OF CHAUCER'S POETRY: SITUATION AND MEDIUM

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The subtitle of this paper might well be "After Ruth Crosby," to honor the scholar who first described forty years ago the extent of oral performance of medieval narrative. Since that important article first appeared in *Speculum*,¹ many advances have been made--particularly by anthropologists, folklorists, sociolinguists, and speech act therapists--in our understanding of oral transmission and reception. The last two disciplines had not even been thought of as disciplines in 1936.

Crosby's follow-up article on "Chaucer and the Custom of Oral Delivery"² lists a great many instances in which the poet's language indicates that he expected his materials to be performed aloud as well as silently read; "redde" and "tolde," she found, are used indiscriminately. The data base is valuable. But in the light of what we now know about oral performance and oral literature, both Crosby's rationale and methodology are naive. She attempted to demonstrate, by identifying several of Chaucer's rhetorical ploys with those of popular romance writers of the day, that he was therefore a popular and an oral poet. They read aloud; Chaucer's work, which has many of the same figures of rhetoric, must therefore also have been read aloud. More questionable is her assumption that certain repetitive words and phrases--stock beginnings and closings, descriptive phrases, stock expletives and other formulas, and tags--conclusively indicate oral

delivery. In this way she anticipates the claims of the Parry-Lord disciples who found orality wherever they found repetition. But while those claims have now been modified, and we now recognize that repetition is not an infallible index of oral composition, it would be a facile mistake to dismiss Crosby's ideas entirely. In this paper I would like to follow through on the thoughtful beginning she made, and point out several modes of investigation available to us since her article appeared in 1938, which she could not have exploited because they have just recently been developed.

One of Crosby's conclusions, which seems fundamental to us now, is that "in the Middle Ages the mass of the people obtained their knowledge of literature through hearing others read or recite rather than through reading to themselves...[and] that writers of this period realized this condition and because of it addressed their hearers as well as their readers."³ And my assumption is that, with Chaucer's work as well, the *Cantebury Tales* were known to many more people orally than in manuscript. Why should we think otherwise? Was Chaucer different from every other poet of his day in this respect? The percentage of literate people in the fourteenth century and the level of literacy (points which Crosby did not develop), argue for the frequency of oral delivery of much of Chaucer's poetry.

Crosby notes that the chanting and aloud recitation of narratives was "the almost inevitable accompaniment of feasting," and that stories were also told during nobles' leisure time and journeys, and that minstrels frequently sang for "common people" on the streets of villages and towns.⁴ Froissart read aloud to small courtly audiences; Petrarch had his works read publicly by others while he was in the audience so that he could criticize his own creations; and Gower "seems to imply" that he

knows his Ballades will be read aloud.⁵ In the *Confessio Amantis*, IV, 2794-5, he wrote,

Or elles that her list comaunde
To rede and here of Troilus. . . .⁶

In the *Bruce*, Bk III, 435-37, Barbour describes another aural situation:

The king, the quhilis, meryly,
Red to thaim, that was him by,⁷
Romans off worthi ferambrace.

The romances again and again indicate that their authors meant them to be read; to take just two examples, *Athelston* begins with "Lystnes, lordyngs that ben hende," and *Le Morte Arthur* opens with the injunction, "lordyngs that ar leff and dere,/lystenyth and I shall you tell." The narrator in *Piers Plowman* lamented that once fireplaces replaced central hearths, people had no focal point for telling stories as they once had.⁸

A more controversial example is the illustration from the Corpus Christi Manuscript 61 depicting Chaucer "reading" to a courtly audience. "Reciting" to a courtly audience better describes this conventional, highly stylized illustration, since there is no manuscript on the lectern-style structure in front of him, a fact that has led one medievalist to remark to me that his theory of memorial recitation is supported by this detail. Perhaps so. The mannered aspects of this picture demand that we approach generalizations about the reader and his audience with caution. On the other hand, its stylization does not *a priori* invalidate any observations one might make; even stylized pictures may have considerable bases in observed behavior. Several of the audience are shown in a conventional garden; a castle is backgrounded. But, taking the stylization into account, we can nevertheless deduce something of the nature of

Chaucer's performance, and something of his interaction with his listeners.

As Professor Edmund Reiss has recently demonstrated, in his paper on "Chaucer and Late Medieval 'Hearing and Reading,'" medieval authors prepared their narratives with both modes of presentation in mind.⁹ Chaucer cautions his audience (his readers?) that he will tell his tale exactly as it happened, offensive though that may be:

And therefore, whoso list it nat hyeere,
Turne over the leaf and chese another tale. . . .

(I 3176-3177)

For the literal-minded the metaphor of the book is to be taken literally. But even if this is so, and "turne over the leef" is not a metaphor, about sixty lines earlier the narrator has observed of the Knight's Tale that none among the Pilgrims

. . . ne seyde it was a noble storie
And worthy for to drawn to memorie, . . . (I 3111-3112)

Chaucer (the Pilgrim) has oral delivery in mind when he begins his Tale of Melibee:

Therefore, lordynges alle, I yow biseche,
If that yow thynke I variee as in my speche,
As thus, though that I telle somewhat moore
Of proverbes than ye han herd bifoore

* * * * *

And therefore herkneth what that I shal seye,
And lat me tellen al my tale, I preye.

(VII 953-956, 965-966)

After Chaucer the Narrator has described his fellow pilgrims, he begins a lengthy preamble to their tales laced with references to "telle," to "seye"--to oral delivery:

Now have I toold you soothly, in a clause,
Th'estaat, th'array, the nombre, and eek the cause
Why that assembled was this compaignye
In Southwerk at this gentil hostelrye

The highte the Tabard, fast by the Belle.
 But now is tyme to yow for to telle,
 How that we baren us that ilke nyght,
 Whan we were in that hostelri alyght;
 And after wol I telle of oure viage
 And al the remenaunt of oure pilgrimage.
 But first I prayyow, of youre curteisye,
 That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye
 Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
 To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
 Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.
 For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
 Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
 He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
 He moot as wel seye o word an another.
 Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,
 And wel ye woot no vileynye is it. . . . (I 715-740)

An oral presentation of narrative calls into question our assumptions about the **Cantebury Tales** as fixed texts: were they, in Chaucer's onstage reading, transactional guidelines between speaker and audience? This question must be asked despite Chaucer's "Wordes Unto Adam," a poetic plea to his scribe to be true to the poet's intent and word. If writing were the only mode of transmission for narrative, we would be able to be more categorical about the implications of this poem; but since it is questionable whether the "text" of the **Tales**, when presented aloud before an audience, was fixed, the injunction to Adam would seem to apply to one mode only. Did Chaucer feel one way about the fixity of his verse when he had written it for Adam to transcribe, and another when he was reciting? I can believe that he would not want his scribe to alter a single letter of writ-

ten verse, although he would have no compunction about making such changes in a public reading. He was, after all, the maker, and reserved the rights to such modifications.

When Chaucerians have theorized about the oral performance of their master's verse, they have almost inevitably scrutinized the text--the product. And this is natural enough for people habituated to narrative in print. But there is more to oral performance than the text, as Parry and Lord showed us. Chaucer must have interacted with his listeners in certain identifiable ways, and this immediate **situation** affected his performance. Also, because he was speaking to responding listeners, rather than writing for them, the **medium** of communication is other than book readers usually consider. These aspects of the performance of the **Canterbury Tales**--situation and medium--will be my concern here.

I will not offer many answers and solutions at this time, but will suggest only a few of the questions which advances in the social sciences now enable us to ask. I would like to begin by reconstructing the situation in which the **Canterbury Tales** were recited to an audience by a teller, preferably--but not necessarily--Geoffrey Chaucer. To those of us who are interested in literature-as-fixed-text, this recitation will have only slight importance. To Chaucer and the admirers of his poetry in his time, oral delivery was the mode by which his "heighe sentence" and "solace" were usually imparted.

What was Chaucer's relationship to his immediate audience? No doubt this varied, even with each performance, but several invariables may be inferred: the tastes, status, and attitudes (religious, political, epistemological, historical) of his audience were likely constants, as well as their attitudes toward the poet, determined in part by his status vis-à-vis theirs, and the fact that he was performing for

their amusement and, if possible, their edification. What status and role situations pre-existed when Chaucer stepped before his royal listeners to read to them from his handheld working manuscript?

This interaction--or perhaps the lack of it, which would be an equally important factor--would have an impact on the text. Was there conversation before Chaucer began reading? Did it continue during his recitation and if so, to what extent and in what key? I will conjecture here that it does not seem plausible that the poet--Chaucer or anyone--performed to a hushed, attentive audience, such as would attend a concert today. We have all been to concerts of medieval and renaissance music: we sit motionlessly and silently during the performance by musicians who are accustomed to rapt attention. At the appropriate time we applaud; the musicians relax until the applause ends, and will even ritually acknowledge this acclaim. When the audience signals its readiness to the concert's resumption, the music recommences. Surely this formal, highly structured, and elaborately framed procedure did not obtain at Chaucer's reading, as it certainly did not apply to the musicians at the courts he attended.

The Corpus Christi illustration shows the audience in various postures, engaged in various social interactions, but hardly any of them are listening to the speaker. While no conclusions can be drawn with photographic certainty, we should never conclude that his audience sat before Chaucer, enthralled. No doubt some did; others may have been distracted from time to time (it is, after all, an outdoor reading); others may not have been interested at all. Chaucer's reputation among his near contemporaries indicates, however, that most did pay attention. If they did not there would be little interaction; and if that were true, either

Chaucer plodded through his text hoping only for its end, or he would have pulled out several stops to liven his performance, as Parry and Lord observed among the *guslars* in Yugoslavia.

Did Chaucer's audience talk during the reading, as in the *Corpus Christi* manuscript? And what about? The story at hand, or some gossip at court? From what we know of similar situations in the late Middle Ages, conversation went on during the reading, and one or two in the audience may even have called out comments, possibly expecting the poet's reply. Even more likely is the discussion that would have followed each tale or each subdivision with such narratives as the *Knight's Tale*, the *Squire's Tale*, or the *Canon Yeoman Tale*. I imagine that during these pauses Chaucer would have elaborated on some point or other, would have clarified others, and debated still others (for example, whose deed was the noblest) with his listeners--it was a contentious age.

What was the role, then, of interaction in performance? We can only adumbrate, of course, but it has to have been much greater than, say, interaction at a reading in a college auditorium by W.D. Snodgrass or W.H. Auden. The audience must have felt free to call out, *ad libidum*. Chaucer must therefore have been a flexible enough performer to withstand interruption without flustering. But is that all? Did he *ad lib* replies to his interactants, or was he too dull-witted for that? And to what extent did he improvise remarks, comments, ripostes? To what extent has Chaucer's voice been blended into that of his characters? Take for instance, the lines of the *Franklin*:

For th'orisonte hath reft the sonne his lyght,--
This is as muche to seye as it was nyght!

(V 1017-1018)

If Chaucer was writing for silent readers these lines would be those of the ironically self-deprecating Franklin. But if Chaucer, or another performer, were reciting them, whom would the audience construe to be the speaker? And what must that say about the performer's relations with his audience?

Take another example. Who becomes the speaker of the line, "He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude"?¹⁰ A literate audience is inclined to understand this evaluation as coming from the Miller, though only after some very willing suspensions. But how must Chaucer have recited this line? The Miller did not know Cato, for his wit was rude; but not Chaucer's, and not those of his audience.

I have implied at several points in this paper that matters of interpretation are often concerned if we consider that most of Chaucer's audience heard his poetry and did not acquire it through private, silent reading. And so it seems to me. Again, I do not wish to get too specific in my critique of others, but rather to suggest that certain critical modes might well be re-examined. For instance, if we are told that Chaucer repeats lines or words--allegedly those words or lines we want to call "key"--as a signal to the audience (reader?), and these echoic lines are several hundred verses--many minutes--apart, we should be suspicious.

To begin with, Chaucer's intentions are usually clear enough: Nicholas is "hende"; Alisoun "hadde a likerous ye"; John's "wit is rude" and he must endure "his care"; and jolly and gay Absolon goes "fetisly," singing in "a loud quynyble," and is "somdeel squaymous/Of fartyng," and "of speche daungerous." Chaucer's audience knew his traditional narratives well, and so would not need subtle echoic forewarnings. If a sentence or clause is uttered fifteen minutes after its twin, there is no

assurance that during its second occurrence its initial, earlier usage and context would be remembered. With a fixed text before us, to leaf back to re-examine a particular line is a simple, and frequently performed procedure. An oral audience has no such recourse to this instant replay. Would they remember the syntax and precise diction of a line recited several minutes earlier? Such a case might be made for some of the language used to describe the Clerk in the General Prologue and Nicholas in the Miller's Tale. Of the former scholar we learn that

For hym was levere have at his bedded heed
 Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed,
 Of Aristotle and his philosophie,
 Than robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrie.

(I 293-296)

While of Nicholas we are told

His Almageste, and bookes grete and smale,
 His astrelabie, longynge for his art,
 His augrym stones layen faire apart,
 On shelves couched at his beddes heed. . . .

(I 3208-3211)

Chaucer does seem to be playing the character of one clerk off against that of the other: the one devoted to the love of learning, the other to the love of worldly things. When we read about the books at the head of Nicholas' bed, we are meant to think of those in the same position near the Oxford Clerk. This comparison is strengthened when we learn also of Nicholas that

His presse ycovered with a faldyng reed;
 And al above ther lay a gay sautrie, . . . (I 3213-3214)

--a contemporary enough device which the New Critics would find to their liking. But are Chaucer's intentions so very opaque here? Is it possible that similar dramatic and narrative

contexts have evoked from him similar means of description? He depicts two scholars, one frivolous, one quite serious; why not describe each quality (learning and seriousness on the one hand, frivolity on the other) in a conventional way?

That Chaucer does intend his audience to think of the Clerk when nearly 3,000 lines later he so described Nicholas can be supported by the contrastive nature of their personalities. But in other cases the argument is not so easily carried; for instance, in the General Prologue's description of the Squire we are told that "Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable" (l 99); 151 lines later we read of the Friar that "Curteis he was and lowely of servyse" (l 250). What is the connection? In the instance of this pair it might be more convincingly argued that Chaucer would expect his reader to remember the former when he read the latter; but are the Squire and the Friar a contrasting couple? What do they have in common; are they similar enough for Chaucer to set off their differences effectively? Is it not really Chaucer's intent here to describe a situation, idea, or trait in conventional language (such as "Bifil that . . . on a day," "whilom," "Lief and deere")? It seems unlikely that an aural audience would recall these phrases, uttered as they were several minutes apart, and quite unlikely that a silent reader would remember the Clerk when he read of Nicholas' books. The fourteenth century was innocent of concordances and the New Critics.

We fortunate literates inevitably think of narrative in terms of fixed print. Subtlety in this mode is of an entirely different sort than it is in dramatic performances. Allusiveness also varies with the medium, and I think that by its nature would be of less use and cogency aloud--particularly in a tradition that values repetitiveness. When Chaucer used the

phrase "pity renneth soone in gentil herte" (V 1986) for the fourth time, did he intend to remind his readers (or listeners) of lines presented long before?¹ Our conjectures on the performance interaction would be somewhat clarified if we took into account the social rules under which this entertainment was played. Those rules in turn are largely a function of the maker's role vis-à-vis his audience, a situation about which we are not ignorant. The highly structured status roles of fourteenth-century English society elucidate this relationship--a major factor in determining the degree of negotiability of the types of stories to be told, their length, the reciter's key, and so on. What can we assume, generally, about the interest of Chaucer's audience--certainly broadly eclectic--from the "God's plenty" range of the **Canterbury Tales**?

Finally, we will want to speculate about Chaucer's status (and stature) as storyteller. That he could write a good yarn is no assurance that he could tell one well. But several qualities of the "text" of the **Canterbury Tales** give clues to his role as reciter. A courtly audience would demand a teller of some social prestige, I think, because of the sermonizing in the **Tales**. It does not seem to me likely that they would have accepted kindly such "heighe sentence" from a lower class minstrel. Chaucer's status gave him license to preach, and not merely to entertain; the latter was a license granted to people of any status. And the license granted to entertain may have implied permission to be loquacious on occasion, but not to be pompous or boring. We can see these rules of storytelling in play in the tales of the Squire, the Monk, the Wife, and the teller of **Sir Thopas**. Chaucer's comment on the rules of storytelling in these cases is quite realistic, and our understanding of what his audience considered

pompous or boring has, for many years, been enhanced by the tales' interruptions.

These are some of the ways, I believe, that we can deepen our appreciation of Chaucer's poetry--not only as fixed text performance, but also as a text created by an intricate interpersonal relationship between author and audience--a relationship which is, nevertheless, not so intricate as to be beyond our grasp.

It is difficult for us to accept that Chaucer's poetry was recited aloud to an aural audience at least as often as it was silently and privately read. The idea seems to imply that a great deal of the close reading we have been doing is wrong-headed, particularly when we imagine that we perceive subtleties that only a careful literate audience would grasp. And, of course, even without considerations of oral delivery, we would all agree that much of such is wrong-headed. I am arguing that a great deal more of those "subtleties" exist only in the mind of the critic because we consistently ignore this fundamental--not chimerical--aspect of the performance of that poetry. Many will inevitably feel threatened.

But if we insist that Chaucer's poetry was read aloud, as was that of many of his contemporaries, we must not necessarily discard the concept of close reading--we must simply restructure it. Oral poets do not lack subtlety and sophistication; theirs are merely of another kind. Chaucer the poet whose poems are read aloud is Chaucer still, full of complexity, intricacy, genius. We have not yet fully appreciated those qualities in him because, as D.W. Robertson had written about Chaucerian criticism in another context, we still think that our poet was a nineteenth-century novelist.

NOTES

1

Ruth Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 11 (1936): 88-110.

2

Idem., "Chaucer and the Custom of Oral Delivery," *Speculum* 13 (1938): 413-32.

3

Idem., "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," p. 100.

4

Ibid., pp. 92-93.

5

Ibid., pp. 95-96.

6

Ibid., p. 97.

7

Ibid., p. 98.

8

Ibid.

9

Edmund Reiss, "Chaucer and Late Medieval 'Hearing and Reading,'" paper presented orally at the 94th annual convention of the Modern Language Association, 28 December 1980.

10

The quote occurs in the *Canterbury Tales*, fragment I, l. 3227. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957) is the source of all subsequent quotes and line references.

11

This line from the Knight's Tale (I 1761) is also found repeated in the Merchant's Tale (IV 1986), Squire's Tale (V 479), and the *Legend of Good Women* (F 503); the Man of Law's Tale contains a paraphrase (II 660).