Playing with the Rhythms of Chaucer's Poetry

Susan Yager, Iowa State University

Ideally, at least, a poem is to be voiced.

– Alan Holder[1]

A broadly accepted idea among teachers of Geoffrey Chaucer is that classroom performance of Chaucer's Middle English benefits students' learning, sharpening their interest and helping them understand his humor. As the founder of modern performance studies, Wallace A. Bacon, declared long ago, any poet's work is enhanced by "being heard as well as read"[2]; Bacon valued "the music of words which silent reading largely ignores" (400). While several scholars have described time-intensive approaches to performing Chaucer, I wish to advocate for experimenting with performance on a smaller scale, even a single class. That is, I think students can also benefit from shorter and simpler exposures to Middle English, including brief tastes of the original language when readings must be taught in translation. This exposure can be intellectually challenging yet completely low-stakes, done purely for fun. My thesis, then, is that the more students literally *play* with the sounds of Chaucer – both as hearers and as speakers – the more they will enjoy exposure to his, and indeed any writer's, poetry.[3]

Although the exercises I suggest, and explain further below, are purely playful, the benefits of performing poetry – such as applying knowledge, creating community within a classroom, and building student confidence – can be substantial. Peter Beidler, for example, reported in the mid-1990s on his experiments with performance, having discovered the usefulness "from a pedagogical standpoint" of involving students in "small readers' theater productions of scenes from Chaucer."[4] Dedicating "the first two or three full weeks" of a

fourteen-week semester to teaching Chaucer's language, he found that readers' theater activities "reinforce[d] the sounds of Chaucerian Middle English" for his students (491-92). A decade later, Fiona Tolhurst discussed the benefits of "acting projects"[5] consuming some "half-dozen class periods" (61) rather than a "traditional paper or exam" as a means of "creating an environment and facilitating the development" of communities of learners in the Chaucer classroom (51). Similarly, Mickey Sweeney redesigned her college's required Chaucer course to have a greater emphasis on performance and found that her students' enthusiasm for the course increased substantially.[6] Sweeney found it worth the time needed to help students rehearse, since "the more invested students become through research and performance, the more they enjoy learning Middle English" (52). In addition to these examples, many teachers of Chaucer rely on some sort of vocal practice or performance, major or minor, in their courses.[7]

My experience with performing Chaucer began decades ago, with a stern professor who randomly called on students to read aloud. I was once caught unprepared, and the effort to ensure there would be no recurrence shaped my professional life. Now, while I encourage students in advanced courses to read Chaucer aloud, I've used the playful approach suggested here only in a mid-level survey-style course for undergraduates – we took a day, no more, to discuss different takes on reading and interpreting Chaucer's "To Rosemounde." Post-class responses showed that students were open to this approach and found it helpful both in understanding Chaucer and in appreciating poetry generally. Broader experience in performance of Chaucer has come from experiencing the annual workshops on Reading Chaucer Aloud at the International Medieval Congress at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo (now named for their founder, the late Alan T. Gaylord). There, small groups of diverse readers – students, teachers, newcomers, experts – engage in playing with Chaucer's poetry in ways that French sociologist Roger Caillois

identified in his landmark study *Man, Play, and Games*.[8] Callois described four kinds of play: *agon*, or competition; *alea*, that is, chance; *mimesis*, or imitative play; and *ilinx*, that is, dizzying or disorienting play, causing a type of vertigo.[9] The latter two activities occur at every Chaucer Aloud sessions at Kalamazoo and can take place in any classroom where Chaucer is read or heard.

Mimicry, as Callois described it, is an important means by which children learn; they engage in mimicry when they play house, for example. Imitation of Chaucerian sounds can be an enjoyable introduction to the kind of play that I mean, particularly for beginners. The passages and discussions that follow are only suggestions on how students might play their way to hearing the shifts and patterns of Chaucer's poetry. Such play is an end in itself, but it is also a pathway to closer considerations of meaning and implication, as I'll describe below. The sound files included here attempt to illustrate the kind of play I have in mind, but they are by no means models of accuracy. They are, intentionally, slightly over the top, with heavy emphasis on emotionalizing and on natural sound breaks.[10] I have chosen a few brief, fairly simple passages, with many lines consisting of one-syllable words. Some of these have been performed at Kalamazoo, but for the most part this is a wish-list of performances I'd like to do with students and which other teachers may choose to try. Lines comprised of monosyllables are easier to comprehend and (usually) pronounce, and therefore should be more fun to "play with" in the way Callois describes.

Essential to this idea of mimetic play – especially when students are new to scansion – is getting beyond the plodding, heavy-footed readings teachers are familiar with, as in "The *droghte* of *March* hath *per*ced *to* the *roote*" (I.2).[11] As David Fuller notes, "There is never a single right scansion" (265), but undoubtedly there can be wrong ones.[12] Our need, then, is to

break up the apparent monotony of iambic pentameter, to allow what Peter Groves calls the "give and *play*" (p. 64, emphasis mine) of Middle English texts.[13] This allowance is what I'm attempting to explore in selecting passages and in suggesting, through text and recording, possible ways to play with them.

Mimetic Play

One enjoyable entry into mimetic play is to imitate Chaucer's birds. For example, no knowledge of Middle English is needed to mimic line 556 of the *House of Fame*, where the Eagle stirs the dazed dreamer in "mannes vois" yet with a raucous and bird-like "Awak!" A similarly noisy passage is lines 179-83 of *Book of the Duchess*, when the messenger to Morpheus tries to wake him, crying:

> "O how! Awake anoon!"
>
> Hit was for noght; there herde hym non.
>
> "Awake!" quod he, "whoo is lyth there?"
>
> And blew his horn ryght in here eere,
>
> And cried "Awaketh!" wonder hyë.

Three instances of *wake* in five lines give the reader plenty to play with, along with "O how!" (perhaps "yoo-hoo!"). Just as playable is line 180, which can be read as a narrator's deadpan aside or even as a whisper. A full-throated playful treatment of this passage could open a consideration of its context: To what extent can we see the passage as comic? Is there a place for the comic in a poem of consolation?

Another enjoyable bit of bird-speak is the debate passage in the *Parliament of Fowles*, for example when the birds shift from a rude but human-like "Com of!" (494) to the naturalistic

"Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!" (499). Connections between bird sounds and English words pop up throughout this section (PF 491-616). I've heard enough geese on campus to recognize the "kakelynge" goose as she honks (nasally, I imagine) "'Pes! Now tak kep every man'" (562, 563); it's fun to imagine how students might play with this section, mimicking the sound of a "tonge loos" (570). It's frankly much less fun to imitate the turtledove, whose speech, like his love, is both regular and true.

Longer and more complex bird-speech appears in – and comprises much of – the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Here, I focus on the moment when Chanticleer is frightened by a dream and Pertelote launches a 60-line speech about his digestion. She recites a list of laxatives that may help, but after prescribing "lawriol, centaure, and fumetere… ellebor… katapuce, or… gaitrys beryis" in VII.2963-65, Pertelote shifts to what I hear as a "henlike" line, containing monosyllabic words exclusively: "Pekke hem up right as they growe and ete hem yn" (2967). The entertaining aspect of this line is the clucking monosyllables as Pertelote simultaneously speaks and pecks. Is she a hen that talks? Or a nagging wife who, Chaucer suddenly reminds us, pecks henlike after her husband? The comedy lies in the contrast between the elaborate medical vocabulary in Pertelote's previous speech and her almost motherly encouragement to Chanticleer to "eat right up."

If Pertelote's pecking startles beginning readers or hearers of Chaucer's iambic pentameter, that's a good thing. The line can't be read with a heavy iambic foot, as with the dreary "*droghte* of *March*," because its scansion isn't immediately clear. At least as I hear it, Pertelote's "Pekke hem up…" resists a simple stressed-unstressed pattern.[14]

My favorite way to read the line is as a row of spondees (I use accent marks here, rather than italics, to show the successive stresses):

> Pékke hém úp ríght ás théy grówe and éte hém ín.

This reading strikes me as most birdlike – imagine *pekke* sounding something like "bawk" and *up right as they growe* as tiny beak-pecks – and also as the funniest, given the preceding list of medicines; however, this is merely a matter of preference. An argument against such playing is that the line, if read this way, has an un-Chaucerian eleven syllables. While I delight in the idea of Pertelote "stuffing" the line with sounds just as she would have Chanticleer stuff himself with laxatives, an easier, more regular reading simply elides the final -e in *pekke*, resulting in the monosyllabic "Pekk'em." This brings the line closer to iambic pentameter; we might scan it this way, with stressed syllables in italics:

> Pekke hem *up* right *as* they *growe* and *ete* hem *yn*.

Up is fairly common in Chaucer, appearing in both unstressed and stressed position in iambic pentameter lines. A useful example is *Knight's Tale*, I.2273, where the word is unstressed at the start of the line and stressed in the third foot: "Up *roos* the *sonne*, and *up* roos *Emelye*." Thus, "Pekke hem *up*…" is a plausible reading. *As* is a somewhat unusual word to be stressed, since it seldom carries much semantic weight, but stressed *as* does occur in Chaucer's work, for example in the *Knight's Tale*, I.1353: "Now *de*meth *as* yow *lis*te, *ye* that *kan*." Nonetheless, there's an awkwardness, and to my ears an artificiality, in forcing VII.2967 into a regular measure. Perhaps a blend of iambs (stresses italicized below) and spondees (accented) yields an optimal reading:

> Pekke hem *up* ríght ás théy grówe and *ete* hem *yn*.

As I hear this version, the line begins and ends regularly and the four medial stresses distinguish the line's center: *ríght ás théy grówe*. It's a bit difficult to pronounce – I count six different vowel sounds here, a mouthful by any standard – but I can imagine Pertelote interrupting her advice-giving with an aside, as if to say "eat them just as they are – no preparation needed!"

Such passages can demonstrate the power and "playability" of Chaucer's lines. While students are not likely to play to this degree, to the extent that they try out various readings, they open their ears to the possibilities of Middle English.

Ilinx and Rhythm

Ilinx, the more physical kind of play that results in something like vertigo, was described by Callois as causing a "voluptuous panic" (23). Such a description may seem excessive for an English class, or even a Kalamazoo read-aloud. But Callois also found *ilinx* in dance, in what he called "the common but insidious giddiness of the waltz" (25), and there are many dance-like rhythms in Chaucer's poetry. Continuing to focus on monosyllabic lines, I hear a simple but moving cadence in the section of the *Man of Law's Tale* describing the wedding feast of King Alla and Custance:

> The fruyt of every tale is for to seye:
>
> They ete, and drynke, and daunce, and synge, and pleye.
>
> They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right… (II.706-08)

The elements of the wedding – food, music, and pleasure – are elegantly conveyed in II.707, and if one keeps in mind that final -e in the first four verbs elides with the succeeding *and*, the line is nearly impossible to mis-scan. It *might* be read in a dull, plodding fashion, but doing so is not easy. The Middle English verbs should be recognizable to any reader of English, and each iamb focuses on one joyous action, with the verbs all in stress position. These are, simply, the things that are done at a wedding; knowing that, performers will be less likely to plod. In fact, in its clarity and simplicity, the line tells a perfect little love story all on its own. The next line, which begins a new stanza, starts with another *they+verb* clause: "They goon to bedde," the natural

next step after feasting and music. But this clause is different, for the parallel clause to the verbs in l. 707 is longer: "They goon to bedde." In addition, the *they* of 707 is a collective pronoun referring to all those present at the wedding, but the same pronoun in the new stanza at 708 refers just to the lovers. Reading the passage aloud, one may stumble briefly over the new, unspoken antecedent, provoking a pause between *they* and *bed.* The second half of 708 follows a longer editorial pause which announces a shift from narrative to evaluation – it's perfectly proper ("skile and right") that newlyweds should go to bed. Depending on how it is performed, the pause may create an artful wink at the consummation of the marriage.

It's interesting to contrast these lines with the passage describing the wedding "feast" in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, when the punished knight must keep his pledge to marry the old crone. Once again the vocabulary is simple, mostly monosyllabic, but the words present a vastly different view of a wedding and wedding night:

> I seye ther nas no joye ne feeste at al;
>
> Ther nas but hevynesse and muche sorwe.
>
> For prively he wedded hire on morwe,
>
> And al day after hidde hym as an owle,
>
> So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule.
>
> Greet was the wo the knyght hadde in his thoght… (III.1078-83)

Despite the gloomy tone, there is music in these lines as well, especially in the quadruple negative of "nas no joye ne feeste… nas but hevynesse." Line 1079 may well be read in a heavy-footed manner, as the line is metrically regular, and the resulting slowness would for once be appropriate. In addition, the rhythmic stresses on *hevynesse* and *sorwe* render the line as utterly depressing. Another opportunity for aural play is the duration of vowel sounds in "…so foule./

Greet was the wo…." (1083). Readers can also extend the sound of the rhyme pair *owle* and *foule*, voicing the misery experienced by the knight.

One more "waltzing" or heavily rhythmic passage, again mainly in monosyllables, occurs near the end of Book I of *House of Fame*:

> When I out at the dores cam,
>
> I faste aboute me beheld.
>
> Then sawgh I but a large feld,
>
> As fer as that I myghte see,
>
> Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
>
> Or bush, or grass, or eryd lond;
>
> For al the feld nas but of sond
>
> As smal as man may see yet lye
>
> In the desert of Libye…. (480-88)

Since *House of Fame* is in iambic tetrameter, this poem moves more quickly than do Chaucer's pentameter lines. Pace is especially prominent in this passage, as the first short, scene-setting sentence is followed by a longer, more detailed one. In that longer sentence, when the narrator lists all the things he does *not* see, the speaker's anxiety picks up in earnest. These few lines contain four references to visual perception, but there is nothing there to be seen, nothing to behold. The items in the list of unseen things shrink, alarmingly I'd say, as the narrator continues. There's neither a town nor even a single house; not only no tree, but not even "bush, or grass, or eryd [cultivated] lond" (485), only the sand of a desert. The list brings us from high to low, from an imagined town to a worm's- (or scorpion's-) eye view of the earth. Playing with

or performing the passage, readers may choose to voice the speaker's panic as the iambs pile up faster and faster.

Once students catch the rhythms of Chaucer's poetry, the time for play might be over, or play might give way to a deeper analysis. The point of play is not to ignore or spurn what prosody can teach, but to grasp, through active learning, the function of Chaucer's meter and the variety of his lines. Appreciation and a sense of ownership are the minimum payoffs of mimetic or *ilinx*-ian play, even when the duration of play is brief. Such play may seem trivial, but it is not; ideally, it can lead to a greater interest in Chaucer's poetry and thus to more nuanced readings. Even falling short of this ideal, students can gain the benefits of classroom play itself, what historian and game theorist Conrad Hyers calls the "intellectual challenge, the sense of adventure, the feeling of achievement" (137) that play provides.[15] Indeed, play is crucial to education at large, according to Hyers, since it is "literally… re-creation and recreation" (134). Playing with the sounds of Chaucer's poetry allows students to both create and re-create. They may find that, in Howell Chickering's words,[16] Chaucer's poetry can be (italics mine again), "*playable* in the extreme" (36).

Notes

[1] Holder, Alan, *Rethinking Meter*, Bucknell, 1995, p. 240.

[2] Bacon, Wallace A., "On the Teaching of Interpretation," *College English,* volume 11, number 7, April 1950, pp. 397-400.

[3] In this I depart from E. T. Donaldson's suggestion that "in Middle English both children and adults 'play,' but in modern English only children do," in his *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader,* Ronald Press, 1958, p. v.

[4] Beidler, Peter G., "Teaching Chaucer as Drama: The Garden Scene in the *Shipman's Tale*," *Exemplaria,* volume 8, 1996, pp. 485-93, 486-87.

[5] Tolhurst, Fiona, "Why We Should Teach – and Our Students Perform – *The Legend of Good Women*," in Gail Ashton and Louise Sylvester, eds., *Teaching Chaucer*, Palgrave, 2007, pp. 46-64.

[6] Sweeney, Mickey, "Generating Enthusiasm: Performing Chaucer in the Small Liberal Arts College Classroom," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching,* volume 15, number 1, 2008, pp. 47-54.

[7] See, for example, Alan Baragona's "The Long and Short of It: Teaching Chaucer's Verbal Music," in *Interpretation and Performance: Essays for Alan Gaylord*, eds. Susan Yager and Elise E. Morse-Gagné, Chaucer Studio, 2013, pp. 117-34.

[8] Callois, Roger, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, Illinois, 1961.

[9] All four kinds of play are incorporated in the *Canterbury Tales*, since competition is built into the pilgrimage and the Host begins the *agon* by having the pilgrims draw straws and "by aventure or sort, or cas," and possibly cheating, having the Knight begin (I.844).

[10] What I'm describing as play is, purposely, not restrained performance such as that described by Alan T. Gaylord in his "Reading Chaucer: What's Allowed in 'Aloud'?" *Chaucer Yearbook,* volume 1, 1992, pp. 87-109. In the interest of student awareness of the possibilities of pattern and sound, I'm willing to forego strict accuracy and restraint.

[11] All citations from Chaucer come from *The Riverside Chaucer,* 3d edition, ed. Larry D. Benson, Houghton Mifflin, 1987. Line references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

[12] Fuller, David, "Reading Chaucer Aloud," in Corinne Saunders, ed., *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 263-84.

[13] Groves, Peter. "Water from the Well: The Reception of Chaucer's Metric," *Parergon,* volume 17, number 2, 2000, pp. 51-73.

[14] The line might have confused even Adam Pinkhurst, Chaucer's scribe; Pinkhurst placed a virgule, suggesting a pause, after *growe* in the Hengwrt manuscript and after *right* in the Ellesmere. See Ruggiers, Paul G., ed., *The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript, with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript*, Oklahoma, 1979, p. 399 (101r), and Woodward, Daniel, and Martin Stevens, eds., *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales: The New Ellesmere Chaucer Monochromatic Facsimile* (of Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9), Huntington Library, 1997, f180v. Many modern editions do not punctuate the line, though a few follow Hengwrt.

[15] Hyers, M. Conrad, "Education as Play," in John H. Kerr and Michael J. Apter, eds., *Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach,* Swets & Zeitlinger, 1991.

[16] Chickering, Howell, "Comic Meter and Rhyme in the *Miller's Tale*," *Chaucer Yearbook,* volume 2, 1995, pp. 17-47.

Works Cited

Bacon, Wallace A., "On the Teaching of Interpretation," *College English,* volume 11, number 7, April 1950, 397-400.

Baragona, Alan, "The Long and Short of It: Teaching Chaucer's Verbal Music," in Susan Yager and Elise E. Morse-Gagné, eds., *Interpretation and Performance: Essays for Alan Gaylord*, Chaucer Studio, 2013, pp. 117-34.

Beidler, Peter G., "Teaching Chaucer as Drama: The Garden Scene in the *Shipman's Tale*," *Exemplaria,* volume 8, 1996, pp. 485-93.

Benson, Larry D., gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Callois, Roger, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, Illinois, 1961.

Chickering, Howell, "Comic Meter and Rhyme in the *Miller's Tale*," *Chaucer Yearbook,* volume 2, 1995, pp. 17-47.

Donaldson, E. T., ed., *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader,* Ronald Press, 1958.

Fuller, David, "Reading Chaucer Aloud," in Corinne Saunders, ed., *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 263-84.

Gaylord, Alan T., "Reading Chaucer: What's Allowed in 'Aloud'?" *Chaucer Yearbook,* volume 1, 1992, pp. 87-109.

Groves, Peter, "Water from the Well: The Reception of Chaucer's Metric," *Parergon,* volume 17, number 2, 2000, pp. 51-73.

Holder, Alan, *Rethinking Meter*, Bucknell, 1995.

Hyers, M. Conrad, "Education as Play," in John H. Kerr and Michael J. Apter, eds., *Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach,* Swets & Zeitlinger, 1991.

Ruggiers, Paul G., ed., *The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript, with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript*, Oklahoma, 1979.

Sweeney, Mickey, "Generating Enthusiasm: Performing Chaucer in the Small Liberal Arts College Classroom," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching,* volume 15, number 1, 2008, pp. 47-54.

Tolhurst, Fiona, "Why We Should Teach – and Our Students Perform – *The Legend of Good Women,*" in Gail Ashton and Louise Sylvester, eds., *Teaching Chaucer*, Palgrave, 2007, pp. 46-64.

Woodward, Daniel, and Martin Stevens, eds., *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales: The New Ellesmere Chaucer Monochromatic Facsimile* (of Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9), Huntington Library, 1997.