

ON NOT READING CHAUCER -- ALOUD

by
Michael Murphy

This essay was first published in
Mediaevalia 9 (1986 for 1983), 205-223.

The original pagination is retained here in square brackets in the text.

ON NOT READING CHAUCER -- ALOUD

Michael Murphy

[p. 205] At a recent meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in New York there was a session called "Readings from Chaucer" in which four scholars read Chaucer's poetry aloud in Middle English. The excerpts read were not simply quotations in prepared papers, but were pure readings from the poet's work without any comment of an interpretive kind. This paper is the response of one attentive listener at that session.

The experience finally served to bring into the open a question that has long lurked in the back of my mind about the usefulness or propriety of trying to read Middle English aloud, at least in any quantity. Here was Chaucerian Middle English read by the finest of a land. Yet the question persisted: why do scholars feel obliged to devote so much effort and time to producing these very peculiar sounds that supposedly approximate the speech of medieval Englishmen? This question is never openly asked because we have all been educated with the notion that it is worthwhile, perhaps essential, to devote time and effort to reading aloud, and requiring our students to read aloud, the poetry of Chaucer in the accepted dialect, a reconstruction of fourteenth-century South East Midland English (SEM). Let us call it Semblance.

The MLA reading turned suspicion into conviction that our efforts are not worthwhile, for I was finally forced to acknowledge openly that even for the seasoned listener Semblance is hard, sometimes impossible, to understand, even when done by the expert reader. Each MLA reader in turn told us what he or she was going to read, and this looked like an admission that when Chaucer is read aloud in Semblance it is better for the audience to have the text or at least the text reference. But all the chosen passages were very familiar to any Chaucerian; hence the audience was effectively in possession of a text, so the session did not present a serious test of how even an audience of Chaucerians follows [p. 206] Semblance read aloud, let alone any other kind of audience. A better test of such understanding, and hence of the whole concept, comes when one reads something that the audience is likely to be a good deal less familiar with: a few stanzas from a less dramatic part of *Troilus*, for example, a piece from the *Second Nun's Tale*, or a longish prose passage from, say, *Boece*. Even when a translation or a paraphrase is not absolutely needed after such a reading, one would be hard put to it to say what element of value had been contributed to the reading by the archaic pronunciation. Repeated experiences of this kind, especially at the hands of inexpert readers at conventions, suggest that hearing or reading Semblance is of dubious value and is best thought of as an exercise in

antiquarianism, not especially harmful but of little real use.

Why then do Chaucerians (and their students) devote so much effort to this dubious exercise? It is probably true that many of our students like to hear *Semblance* read aloud in class and that we, their teachers, like showing off a little. But scholars also claim more decided aesthetic advantages from hearing Chaucer read aloud in these unfamiliar sounds. Their attitude may be represented by the following statements of two well-known and influential medievalists. First Norman Eliason:

The delight which Chaucer's poetry affords the ear is remarkable. Clearly he wrote for the ear, intending his verse to be heard rather than silently read, and taking pains therefore to give it auditory appeal. ¹

Citing ten lines from the description of the Friar in the *General Prologue*, Eliason then goes on to quote Bernard F. Huppe to the effect that "these lines must be read aloud to catch the full force of the change from virtuous indignation over the nastiness of the poor and sick . . . to fawning servility." ² Eliason finds this statement "quite true." But can it be? Presumably the one who reads the Chaucerian passage aloud has already caught "the full force of the change" by his silent reading in order to register it in his voice. Can it be necessary for another equally perceptive reader to hear it read aloud by the first in order to perceive the meaning? Having agreed with Huppe's point, Eliason then goes on to make his own which is

[207] simply this, that Chaucer's verse — aside from any added force it may gain by being read aloud — is capable of producing an auditory effect so delightful that it alone may content us. An illustration of this is the best known passage in Chaucer, the opening lines of the **Canterbury Tales** [They are reproduced]. Stripped of its embellishing details, all that this very long sentence says is that in spring people like to go on pilgrimages, especially to Canterbury. Yet we are not at all bothered by this. The sound rather than the sense is all that matters, reaching a peak of auditory enchantment in the lines:

And especially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende
The hooly blisful martir for to seke

Chaucer rarely beguiles us thus, and never more flagrantly (p. 17).

This statement of a very personal taste is only slightly disguised as a critical judgment inviting agreement from all reasonable people — "us." One could argue strenuously against being included in the flagrant auditory seduction, but if Eliason is right about the rest of "us," then the reading tasks in *Semblance* that we set our students, and the kind of reading session held at the MLA are completely justified.

Semblance is also justified by the allied argument that it serves to remind all concerned that the dialect of our poet differed markedly from our own dialects of English. But we do not read Shakespeare or Pope in reconstructed dialects, although the same philological methods that give us Semblance also give us — and, with somewhat more certainty — transcriptions and recordings of seventeenth and eighteenth-century English by scholars like Wyld and Kokeritz. And what of Joyce? Does any scholar consider having his students read Joyce aloud in a semblance of Joyce's still-living dialect? Few teachers would be willing to subject themselves to anything so painful.

If we insist on Semblance in our Chaucer classes, we should at least warn our students that the pronunciation we use would, according to Kokeritz, "probably sound old fashioned to Chaucer, could he hear it, [208] perhaps reminding him of the speech of his grandparents,"³ a truly curious state of affairs. Eliason agrees with this statement of Kokeritz, but, more subjective and speculative, adds that Chaucer would be "amused by the strangeness of our pronunciation and pleased because of its essential correctness" (p. 18). About this mere approximation of Semblance to Chaucer's speech, Eliason feels that "whatever is lost is probably offset by the quaint sound that Chaucer's verse has for our ears, a quaintness that adds a charm totally absent, of course, in his day" (p. 18).

There are scholars who feel that more than quaintness is at stake, however. One critic of an earlier version of this paper contended that "to modernize Chaucer's long vowels is to change the original music, and since the original music was exquisite, the changes are bound to be for the worse." The first clause here is indisputable; the other two speculative in different degrees. But even if the "original music was exquisite" there is a serious question whether it still is. Even if we had "musicians" skilled in playing the original score, the results would still be discordant to ears accustomed to a different mode. But the music analogy breaks down anyway, for learning to hear Semblance is not like listening to an old tune played in a different key on another instrument.

The second critic held that "non-fourteenth-century readers with a shared sense of what their material ought to sound like can learn a good deal from their own crude renderings of it . . . things they could not have learned from silent reading: touches of humor, nuances of characterization, the interplay of different kinds of diction (French vs. Latin vs. Anglo-Saxon, courtly vs. colloquial, etc.)". These and similar unsubstantiated claims illustrate the truism that talk about the relationship of sound and sense in literature is easy, demonstration notoriously difficult. This is so even when dealing with modern work. Making similar judgments about crude renderings in a reconstructed dialect that none of us has ever spoken or written or heard from a "native" is rash indeed. This would be true even if we were sure that medieval poets subscribed to Pope's dictum that "the sound must seem an echo to the sense." But we are not sure, and Professor John Stevens recently devoted much of his inaugural lecture at Cambridge to the contention that the

Popean aesthetic was unknown to Chaucer and his contemporaries. ⁴ If he is right, such judgments about sound-sense relationships are doubly out of place in serious criticism of Chaucer's poetry.

The most telling argument in favor of reading Chaucer in Semblance [209] is probably that some knowledge of approximate pronunciation is useful for establishing the text and prosody (although it has not stopped disagreements about both). Such was the intention, Kokeritz declares, for his large study of Shakespeare's Pronunciation. ⁵ It was not written "merely to gratify an antiquarian interest, however valid, nor to satisfy a natural curiosity about the phonetics of Shakespeare's language," but as an essential help with the "textual and prosodic problems in the English literature of the Renaissance" and especially as a "salutary corrective to textual emendation" (p. vi). Kokeritz is less clear about his little *Guide* to Chaucer's Pronunciation, which "presupposes no knowledge of ME phonology," a knowledge "absolutely essential in dealing with textual cruces" (p. 11). Is the purpose of this much-used Guide merely antiquarian then, of no special help in dealing with textual cruces? Certainly, apart from its phonetic transcriptions of pieces from the Tales it offers little more information on Chaucer's phonology than the average edition. And, to the non-phonetician at least, the transcriptions seem to be a small advance over those printed in Alexander Ellis's century-old work **On Early English Pronunciation**. ⁶

Yet Kokeritz's short book has helped to perpetuate a situation where it is impossible to read Chaucer aloud except in Semblance. On the other hand his large book on Shakespeare's pronunciation has not caused a ripple in the calm of the accepted pronunciation of that poet's work in the classroom, let alone on the stage. Nor does he suggest that it should. In this he is very much in the Ellis tradition which has, for a hundred years) dictated totally different phonological treatment for these two poets.

Ellis set out in detail the evidence for Shakespeare's pronunciation, and then laid down the law that has been observed ever since:

The pronunciation founded on these conclusions, and realized in the following examples, may at first hearing appear rude and provincial. But I have tried the effect of reading some of these passages to many persons, including well-known elocutionists, and the general result has been an expression of satisfaction, showing that the poetry was not burlesqued or in any way impaired by this change, but on the contrary, seemed to gain in power and impressiveness. Yet, though every real lover of Shakespeare will be glad to know how the grand words may have sounded to [210] Shakespeare's audience, how he himself may have conceived their music, how he himself may have meant them to be uttered and win their way to the hearts of his audience, it is, of course, not to be thought of that Shakespeare's plays should now be publicly read or performed in this pronunciation. The language of

the XVIth century stands in this respect on a totally different footing from that of the XIVth. Chaucer's verse and rhyme are quite unintelligible, if he is read with our modern pronunciation. Shakespeare's metre only rarely halts in our present utterance . . . and his rhymes are so far from being perfect, as we have seen, that the slightly greater degree of imperfection introduced by modern utterance is not felt. His language, although archaic enough in structure to render the attempts of imitators ludicrous, is yet so familiar to us from the constant habit of reading his plays, and the contemporary authorized version of the Bible, that it does not require a special study or a special method of reading, by which silent letters are resuscitated. As essentially our household poet, Shakespeare will and must, in each age of the English language, be read and spoken in the current pronunciation of the time, and any marked departure from it (except occasional and familiar "resolutions," sounding the final *-ed*, and shifting the position of the accent, which are accepted archaisms consecrated by usage), would withdraw the attention of a mixed audience or of the habitual reader from the thought to word, would cross old associations, would jar upon cherished memories, and would be therefore generally unacceptable. Hence all recent editions of the English Bible of 1611 and of Shakespeare's Plays and Poems (when not avowedly facsimile) adopt the current orthography of the time. . . . A similar attempt has been recently made with Chaucer, but it is not so easy, many of the words having no modern spelling . . . and the necessity for adding on and sounding final *-e*'s, and shifting the place of the accent, for no apparent purpose but to make the line scan, has a trailily weakening effect, which maligns the fine old rhythms [Pt. 3, 982-985].⁷

[211] A prettier example of special pleading would be hard to find, but it easily won the day and has remained largely unexamined and accepted since.⁸ Even the phrasing of later scholars seems indebted to Ellis's words when he declared his intention to apply his method of investigating the phonology of the past in order "to allow us to declaim Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as they might have been read during his lifetime, although doubtless with a modern accent which would have failed to satisfy the poet's ear. Still, this pronunciation would have probably been perfectly intelligible, while our modern English method of reading must have sounded as mere gibberish" (Pt. I, p. 255).⁹

The arguments of Ellis for old pronunciation (and old orthography) set the trend that has prevailed since his time. Thomas Lounsbury's was the only major voice that was raised to oppose these arguments for differentiating between the treatment of Shakespeare's verse and that of Chaucer. But his questions went unanswered and his objections unheeded. Indeed one has to suspect that his remarks on the whole subject — recommended reading for anyone interested in the topic — remain largely unread.¹⁰ So we are left with a situation based on Ellis's defective brief and our own timidity or laziness, and medievalists have still not provided an adequate answer to questions like

these: Why do Chaucer's obsolete words sound better in an obsolete phonology than Shakespeare's? Is a Shakespearean audience more or less unhappy to hear that Hamlet's father went to his account "unhousled, disappointed, unannealed" than if he had gone "oonhūsled, disappynted, oonanailed"? In Shakespeare classes, should we press our students to hear Shakespeare's "grand words gain in power and impressiveness" when pronounced in a version of Shakespeare's spoken language? Should we feel obliged, say, to demonstrate regularly to students that the members of the English upper classes represented on Shakespeare's stage did not speak with the highly "cultured" tones of the actors who represent them on today's stage and screen? Shakespeareans do not do so, probably because (1) most of them know little about Elizabethan phonology and (2) they see such a practice as an exercise in archaism which is of little value. A recent television recitation of a small piece from Macbeth in Elizabethan English by the British actor Ian MacKellan made it clear that they are right.

Much more than Shakespeareans, of course, Chaucerians have felt the need, in order to make the verses scan, to pronounce in Chaucer's [212] text syllables long since silent in Standard English. It is, presumably, this metrical pressure that has led to such ruthless fidelity to the whole of an obsolete phonological system while happily adapting or abandoning parts of an archaic graphic system. Nobody questions the use of modern punctuation and capitalization even in scholarly editions, though there may be vigorous disagreements about an editor's choices. Not everyone favors the normalized orthography of Howard and Donaldson, but their editions have been widely used. Nevertheless, medievalists will not allow similar "liberties" with phonology, where ready comprehensibility has had to yield to the combined pressures or attractions of quaintness and metrical regularity. As a result of this seduction or capitulation, the auditor at a Semblance reading keeps having to remind himself of very elementary things: that "be me" is really "by my," that "ee went" is not in fact "he went" but "I went"; that "thay" is now the singular "thee" and now the plural "they." When the mob following Chanticleer and the Fox start "shooting" one must recall that they are really only "shouting," and so on. Indeed every time that a word with a shifted long vowel comes up — and that is all the time — it demands a mental adjustment, unless one has the passage pretty well by heart. And this is true even when pronunciation is not influenced by metrical constraints.

By contrast, no actor or scholar (except Kokeritz on a record), would dream of having Hamlet "shoot the action to the word," of having him ask the player to "spake the speech trippingly on the tungue" or refer to his own short written speech as "me lines"; and she would be a very stage-Irish Cleopatra who sat on a "trone" of "baten gold" with "smilin buys" on "aich" side of her. Such historically "correct" renderings were unthinkable even a hundred years ago, as Ellis said (cited above). But since Ellis's time and largely as a result of his efforts we have accepted renditions of Middle English that sound bucolic and are partly incomprehensible. J. M. Manly, echoing Ellis, complained that Chaucer's verse

pronounced as modern English with an occasional extra syllable sounded "like the babbling of a child or like a rustic dialect." (Cited by Ian Robinson, p. 30.) But anyone who has listened to a record of Oxford professors Neville Coghill and Norman Davis reading extracts from Chaucer in Semblance cannot but be struck by the almost comical contrast between the normal cultivated speech of these English scholars in their introductory remarks, and the rustic accents they feel obliged to affect for their historically "correct" reading;" the difficulty of following their [213] scholarly bucolics is ameliorated only by the fact that they chose very familiar pieces. Indeed, Jess Bessinger's recording of the Parliament of Fowls, a poem less familiar than most of the Tales, is sometimes quite difficult to follow without text in hand. ¹²

These and other recordings may be useful for informing our students and reminding ourselves how different the sounds of medieval English(es) probably were from those of any standard dialect of modern English. But that is no compelling reason why we or our students should all emulate them so relentlessly. Let us listen again to Chaucer's own appeal, so often quoted:

And for there is so gret diversite
In Englissh and in wryting of oure tonge,
So prey I god that non myswrite the,
Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
That thow be understonde, God I beseche.
(Troilus and Criseyde, V. 1793-98)

Scholars have been so anxious to answer the prayer of the third and fourth lines that they have forgotten that of the fifth and sixth. It is our Godlike task to answer them both at once.

Here is another well-worn linguistic observation from the same source:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
Withinne a thousand year, and wordes tho
That hadden pris, now wonder nice and straunge
Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so
And spedde as wel in love as men now do.

(Troilus and Criseyde, II, 22-26)

The question that we have to answer without asking for approval except from each other is whether we must try to speak his verse as he did, thus making wonder nice and strange

what could be quite familiar. I think that we will speed just as well or better, if we do not.

I am not quite alone in this belief. Lounsbury's nineteenth-century view has already been mentioned; and Ian Robinson's book **Chaucer's Prosody** (1971) ¹³ is a recent contribution that breaks the almost total silence [214] of many years about the convention of reading Chaucer aloud only in Semblance. His chapter "What Do You Need to Know to Read Chaucer?" suggests, as I do, that the accepted method of reading Chaucer aloud needs to be changed or at least reexamined in a way it has not been this many a year.

Robinson asks rhetorically "whether we must read Chaucer with the vowel sounds of his century rather than our own," and he answers his own question by saying that this method of proceeding "treats Chaucer's language as dead" (pp. 21-22). This, I think, is the crucial objection. Most of us have thought that we were getting closer to Chaucer, to the melody of his language, by trying to reproduce his sounds, however apologetically. Only thus, we said, can we hope to appreciate the subtleties of the tunes that this poet, like all great poets, composes and orchestrates. But the truth behind the apologetic talk about approximate Chaucerian pronunciation in Semblance is an uneasy and unacknowledged fear that we do not have the power to resurrect the dead, that the competence necessary for pronouncing fourteenth-century London English with any hope of reproducing Chaucer's living language is simply not available. To confuse knowledge of the "broad sounds" of the vowels given by historical phonology with the intimate, subtle awareness necessary to read Middle English almost like a "native" is a bad mistake (p. 25).

The two authors of a recent large study of Old English phonology are even more firm in their rejection of any attempt to translate the results of their researches into a guide for pronunciation in the fashion of Ellis:

. . . attempts to reconstruct the 'pronunciation' of a dead language are (a) usually doomed from the first to circularity by a bias in favor of certain (usually spelling based) norms, and (b) are therefore based on over simple and often rather naive- notions of what Modern English phonetic systems are really like. . . . And further, such reconstructions are based, in the nature of things, on so little hard evidence that the attempt seems hardly worth making, and is likely to lead either to vacuous or irresponsible statements when it is made. . . . As far as we can tell, historical investigation does not permit us to recover much more than grossly binary (i.e., classificatory) specifications. When it [215] comes to 'pronunciation' . . . we must simply say that we have no relevant information, and cannot even conceive how we might get it, short of a time machine. This holds true, in fact, not only for reconstructions based on written texts, but even on those based on the apparently precise observations of orthoepists ... [like John Hart (1569),] one of the very best. ¹⁴

One can, then, only agree with Robinson's contention that the results of Semblance are "small reward for abandoning one's own language" (pp. 22-25). His conclusion seems

unavoidable: "The only alternative to treating Chaucer's English as a dead language . . . must be to keep his poetry alive in a comparable way by performing it as part of our own language . . . to explore it as an unfamiliar province of modern English . . . to make the new system an extension of the original language" (pp. 29-33).

Unfortunately, Robinson backs away a little from the conclusion of his argument: "It is not my intention," he says, "to persuade anyone to abandon any particular sound system, provided only that he feels at home with it" (p. 30). What a private reader feels comfortable with is always a private matter; a phonological system that we impose on our students and colleagues as the only possible public one is everybody's business. The currently accepted system is, in fact, an aspect of the kind of historicism opposed by another critic, Robert O. Payne, who questions the attitude that the truth about older literature is "recoverable by us moderns if we use that one true method of repressing all our own responses and miming those of some prior"¹⁵ Payne was not here writing about the pronunciation of Chaucer's verse; but his remarks apply at least as well to the entrenched attitudes to that topic, for the new faith preached by Ellis a hundred years ago. has become the received doctrine and practice of a solemn and great fraternity which one cannot even join without a rather demanding novitiate where learning the language of the order is one of the major requirements, and where questioning its accuracy and usefulness is not encouraged. Any suspicions that the practice of Semblance is more cultist indulgence than scholastic or scholarly rigor have to be suppressed.

What, then, is a reasonable alternative? Years before the publication of Ellis's book there appeared a volume of Chaucer with a rather [216] unscholarly kind of title: **The Riches of Chaucer, in which his impurities have been expunged, his spelling modernized, his rhythm accentuated** . . . edited Charles Cowden Clarke (London, 1835). For us the book's only interest is that it was the first attempt to do for Chaucer what had long been done for Shakespeare, namely to print his work in modern orthography so that it could be read privately by a literate but unscholarly audience. Some years later a fuller edition using the same method was published by Gilfillan,¹⁶ and I will use this Clarke-Gilfillan text to suggest how Chaucer might be read publicly by students and scholars:

There was also a Nun, a Prioress,
That of her smiling was full simple and coy;
Her greatest oath n' as but by Saint Eloy;
And she was cleped Madame Eglentine.
Full well she sang the servicë divine,
Entuned in her nose full sweetely;
And French she spake full fair and fetisly,
After the school of Stratford attë Bow,
For French of Paris was to her unknow.

At meatë was she well taught withal;
 She let no morsel from her lippës fall,
 Ne wet her fingers in her saucë deep.
 Well could she carry a morsel, and well keep,
 That no drop ne fell upon her breast.
 In courtesy was set full much her lest.
 Her over-lippë wiped she so clean,
 That in her cuppë was no farthing seen
 Of greasë, when she drunken had her draught
 Full seemëly after her meat she raught.
 And sickerly she was of great disport,
 And full pleasánt, and amiable of port,
 And pained her to counterfeiten cheer
 Of court, and be estatly of mannér,
 And to be holden digne of reverence.

But for to spoken of her consciënce,
 She was so charitable and so piteous
 She wouldë weep if that she saw a mouse
 Caught in a trap. if it were dead or bled.

[217] Of smallë houndes had she, that she fed
 With roasted flesh, and milk, and wastel bread.
 But sore wept she if one of them were dead,
 Or if men smote it with a yardë smart:
 And all was conscience and tender heart.

Full seemly her wimple ypinchëd was;
 Her nose tretis; her eyen gray as glass;
 Her mouth full small, and thereto soft and red;
 But sickerly she had a fair foreheád.
 It was almost a spannë broad I trow;
 For hardily she was not undergrow.

Full fetise was her cloak, as I was ware.
 Of small corál about her arm she bare
 A pair of beadës, gauded all with green;
 And thereon hung a brooch of gold full sheen,
 On which was first ywritten a crowned A,
 And after, *Amor vincit omnia*.

It has not been part of my argument here that Chaucer's work should be printed in modernized version, though that is perhaps the logical extension of my argument for a modern public pronunciation of Chaucer. But for the moment I leave that question in abeyance. The Clarke-Gilfillan text provides a good starting point for a discussion as to how Chaucer might be adapted to the phonemes of modern English, One could conceivably accept the version printed above, as it is. More likely one would reject the *n'as* of l. 120, and possibly question the accentuation on *pleasánt* (138), *consciënce* (142), *forehed* (154), *corál* (158), and the absence of pronunciation markers on *cleped*

(121), *entuned* (123), *wiped* (133), *pained* (139), for the pronunciation of final *-ed*, even with a full vowel sound, would probably be acceptable, especially because it is very familiar in English poetry even into modern times, but the syllable would be even better with a light schwa /ə/. In many of the cases of final *-e* one can get that light extra syllable effect by holding on to (doubling) the preceding consonant. This seems to work best with sounds like *p* and *s*, and best of all at the end of a phrase, like "Of grease" or "in her cuppe" (hence, no heed for the odd spelling). There may, indeed, be no real distinction between the two methods mentioned: a phonetician might claim that the release of breath after a sharply enunciated consonant inevitably gives a light schwa sound. In any case, pronounced *-e*'s in final syllables rarely interfere with understanding, and may be preferred for smoother rhythmic movement: a syllabic *-ed* or *-es* in words like *wiped* and *houndes* offers no problems, nor does the more archaic-sounding *-en* of *counterfeiten* or *holden*, especially if the syllable is pronounced with a light schwa sound, or if one goes a step further and takes a hint from the way students pronounce them until they are instructed otherwise *counterfeitn*, *holdn*. Even the continental accentuation on words like *pleasant* might be retained by those who prefer a smooth rhythm since it does not interfere with understanding. The full obsolesces like *tretis*, *fetise*, *sickerly* and so forth, have to be accepted as they are, just as we accept Hamlet's "unhousled, disappointed, unannealed" — words that have the added problem of being misleading in modern pronunciation.

This brief discussion does not, of course, dispose of all the problem of reading Chaucer aloud in living English. There will be fairly frequent problems of rhyme, for example. A rough count shows that about one sixth of the rhymes in the *General Prologue* will not work in modern pronunciation, and we can assume that the same will hold for most of the rest of Chaucer's rhymed couplets. Still other questions present themselves: how much old pronunciation for the sake of rhyme could the language take and still be living English? How many *-ion* / *-ioun* endings, for example, can get two syllables; how many *y*- 's preceding past participles can be kept; how far do we adhere to doublets like *those* / *tho* when they rhyme and when they do not? Sometimes the modern way will yield a silliness: "Anon he gave the sick man his boot" (GP [Physician] 424). In addition, deflections from the pentameter will be common, and this will produce a rather more uneven rhythm than *Semblance* does.

Fredson Bowers has suggested that "editors engaged in modernizations of texts would be well advised to discuss their difficulties more fully in print for their mutual advantage, and for the formulation of some working conventions that will do the least damage."¹⁷ Although our business with Chaucer's text here is only analogous to the task with Elizabethan texts that Bowers is referring to, it has seemed reasonable to begin to follow his advice, for there are no pat answers for even the limited number of questions and problems I have mentioned. But I would observe that those who can accept a prosody of the kind proposed by Ian Robinson and James Southworth,¹⁸ or who do not insist on a more [219] or less perfect iambic pentameter line, should not have undue difficulty adapting

Chaucer's verse to our living dialects. It should be possible in the twentieth-century — post Eliot, post-Pound, post-Stevens — to read Chaucer's verse without insisting on near certainty of rhyme or on complete popean smoothness of rhythm. ¹⁹ It should at least be interesting, and possibly even instructive, to hear Chaucer read aloud as every postmedieval writer is, namely in the phonology of the reader's natural dialect, the only one that most of us can claim to handle with any competence. Public readings in a dialect one does not handle competently are hard to justify, especially in the classroom. ²⁰

The dialect of English that I suggest as appropriate for reading Chaucer aloud neither is nor was spoken anywhere as a standard, for it has Chaucer's written words but our own varying phonologies. It is admittedly a hybrid, but it is alive. The Semblance presently used by scholars was never spoken in any province of English either; but it is purely artificial, and is given an appearance of life only by our uncritical acceptance of the convention and by the enthusiasm of its practitioners who all profess to follow Kokeritz but who produce a wealth of idiolects undreamed of in his phonology. Our way with Shakespeare and Spenser is different from what I suggest for Chaucer only in degree, not in kind. Spenser, as Jonson observed long ago, wrote a language that was neither medieval nor sixteenth-century English, and we read him aloud in a living English that is not medieval nor sixteenth-century nor yet modern standard — a reasonable convention.

It may once more be necessary, in Ellis's own words, for "Early English scholars to endeavour to read some passages for themselves, and not prejudge the effect, as many from old habits may feel inclined" (Pt. 3, p. 677). But this time we should take the text as script rather than as scripture, to be performed faithfully but modernly and without undue reverence, rather like a play. If old habits can be overcome, the method of reading in living English phonology can be applied to at least one Middle English text other than Chaucer with even more marked effect. **Piers Plowman** was written not in South East Midland English but in South West Midland English. But conference readers never seem to read it aloud in anything but Semblance, and they do the same with **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** and **Pearl**, written in the even more strikingly different dialect of the North West Midland. The result is both unhistorical and incomprehensible. For **Piers Plowman** especially, the [220] results of adapting the words to a living English phonology are quite rewarding. It does not have the profusion of special poetic vocabulary that the NWM poems have, and there is no need to adapt for rhyme or iambic pentameter. The reading suffers no diminution in vigor, and improves hugely in comprehensibility.

The vocabulary of **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** and other NWM poems offers rather more problems, and the rhyming in some of them adds further complication. There may, indeed, be no way to retrieve most of these poems for public reading." At a recent lecture on **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** the speaker read his frequent quotations from the poem in the usual inappropriate Semblance. He obviously expected (correctly)

that he would not be understood by an audience of fellow medievalists, both mature scholars and graduate students, for immediately after each quotation from the original he provided a translation. His method is common but surely it is not sensible. The manner of reading medieval English that was advocated by Ellis, and which has been practiced and extended by ourselves, has been given a better than fair test; and it does not stand up very well. I suggest that the time has come to replace it.

NOTES

1. Norman Eliason, **The Language of Chaucer's Poetry**, *Anglistica* 17 (Copenhagen, 1972), p. 16
2. **A Reading of the Canterbury Tales** (Albany, N.Y., 1964), p. 37.
3. Helge Kokeritz, **A Guide to Chaucer's Pronunciation** (New York, 1961), p. 9.
4. **The Old Sound and the New** (Cambridge, 1982).
5. Helge Kokeritz, **Shakespeare's Pronunciation** (New Haven, Conn., 1953).
6. Alexander Ellis, **On Early English Pronunciation**, Pt. III, EETS e.s. xiv (London, 1871; rpt. New York, 1968). My criticism, in the pages that follow, of the results of Ellis's suggestion about the practical use of his investigations into early English phonology, should not be construed as a dismissal of his erudition, his persistence, and his organizing power in assembling and analyzing large masses of intractable [221] material, much of it in manuscript. All later investigators of the subject have been and will be indebted to his monumental work.
7. It is instructive to compare this passage, especially its last two sentences, with the extended and very clear discussion of the problems faced even now by the editor of a modern-spelling Shakespeare text in Stanley Wells's **Modernizing Shakespeare's Spelling** (Oxford, 1980), pp. 1-34. Wells's essay should help to dispel the notion implied by Ellis and probably held by most of us, that there can be few problems facing the Shakespeare editor at this point in a long history of modernization. The problems would occur more frequently for the editor of a modernized Chaucer text (even if it were only for the purpose of reading aloud) but many of them seem to be the kind that such an

editor would face. For the Chaucer referred to by Ellis, see the quotation from the General Prologue describing the Prioress, cited below.

8. For example, in his recent thorough reassessment of Shakespearean phonology, especially Kokeritz's representation of it, Fausto Cercignani says blithely: "Unlike Chaucer, whose poetry is unintelligible unless one adopts a reconstructed style of speech with the help of phonemic transcriptions, Shakespeare will always be read and spoken in the more or less natural pronunciation of the reader or actor" (**Shakespeare's Works and Elizabethan Pronunciation** [Oxford, 1981]), preface, p. viii. He, therefore, sees no point in providing phonemic transcriptions for Shakespeare's sounds, even though his thesis is that Kokeritz was wrong in pressing his conclusion that "Shakespeare's pronunciation strongly resembled modern English" (p. 28).

9. A footnote to this statement adds: "This opinion I entertain so strongly that I retain its expression in the text, notwithstanding that I have been informed, since it was written, that many Early English scholars adopt systems of pronunciation agreeing in the main with our barbarous method of reading Latin and Greek. While this sheet was passing through the press I received the following: 'As to O. E. and A. S. pronunciation my scheme is i = i of shine, e = e of feet, a = a of father, o = o of bone, ae = a of fate, u = ou of house, &', a scheme utterly irreconcilable with the direct evidence of the last chapter."

Presumably, by OE, Ellis's correspondent meant ME. Ellis's reference to Latin and Greek is apt. The hot contemporary argument about reform in [the pronunciation] of those languages provides both amusing and instructive reading. See G. C. Moore Smith, "The English Language and the 'Restored' Pronunciation of Latin" in **Festschrift for Otto Jespersen** (London, 1930); W. S. Allen, **Vox Latina** (Cambridge, 1914), appendix A.

10. Thomas Lounsbury, **Studies in Chaucer**, (1892; rpt. New York, 1962), III, 264-79. Lounsbury suggested his reforms in spelling and pronunciation not for professional Chaucerians but for all other educated readers: "it is not on behalf of students [i.e., scholars] that in this instance a resort to modern spelling is proposed. It is for that already large and steadily increasing class who would go to Chaucer [222] not at all from linguistic but from purely literary motives" (268). "This clothing of the poet's words in modern orthography necessarily involves taking, so far as popular use is concerned, the still further ground that he should be pronounced as near to modern English as can be done without destroying the harmony of the versification." (271). Ian Robinson, **Chaucer's Prosody** (Cambridge, 1971), also has some especially apt remarks on our different ways of treating Chaucer and Shakespeare (pp. 27 ff).

11. Nevill Coghill and Norman Davis, **Selections from the Canterbury Tales**, Spoken Arts SA 919 (1966).

12. Jess Bessinger, **The Poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer Read in Middle English**,

Caedmon TC 1226 (1967).

13. Cited in note 10 above.

14. Roger Lass and John Anderson, **Old English Phonology** (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 202-03. For the same opinion from another linguist see Patricia Wolfe, **Linguistic Change and the Great Vowel Shift in English** (Berkeley, 1972), p. 2. For the opinion of a distinguished historical dialectologist see Angus McIntosh "The Analysis of Written Middle English," **Transactions of the Philological Society** (1956), 26-55: "An analysis . . . taking full account of all aspects of the written language would undoubtedly enable us in due course to decide far better than is possible at present just what we are entitled to deduce about spoken language from written remains. It might also help to show how tentative and subjective all recordings must be which attempt to reproduce the 'pronunciation' of say Chaucer or Shakespeare. Evidence is wanting for so many of the phonetic phenomena relevant to a full reconstruction that the result is likely to tell us as much about the phonetic habits of the reciter as anything else."

15. Robert O. Payne, "The Kind of Historicism We Need" in **Chaucer at Albany**, ed. Beryl Rowland (New York, 1975), p. 184.

16. George Gilfillan, **The Canterbury Tales** (Edinburgh, 1868). Lounsbury believed enough in his own argument to use a modern orthography in his own quotations from Chaucer in **Studies**, and they should be compared with the Clarke-Gilfillan version illustrated here, as should the other nineteenth-century pronunciations of older English mentioned in note 9 above. Another attempt at reproducing Chaucer's pronunciation that might profitably be consulted is in the appendix to R. F. Weymouth's monograph **On Early English Pronunciation** (London, 1874), written "in opposition to the views maintained by Mr. A. J. Ellis" (title page).

17. Fredson Bowers, "Principle and Practice in Editing Early Dramatic Texts" in **Textual and Literary Criticism** (Cambridge, 1959), p. 180. cited in Wells, p. 3.

[223]

18. See J. G. Southworth, **Verses of Cadence** (Oxford, 1954), and **The Prosody of Chaucer and his Followers** (Oxford, 1962); P. F. Baum, **Chaucer's Verse** (Durham, N.C., 1961); M. Halle and S. J. Keyser, "Chaucer and the Study of Prosody" **College English**, 28 (1966), 187-219; Jack Conner, **English Prosody from Chaucer to Wyatt** (The Hague, 1974). Alan Gaylord's article "Scanning the Prosodists" in **CR II** (1976), 32-82 reviews all these and other contributions to the debate, plays down the force of the opinions expressed by Lass and Anderson, and by Wolfe on pronunciation (n. 14 above), and dismisses Robinson's views to "a decent obscurity".

19. There is a valuable cautionary chapter, "The Editorial Process," in N. F. Blake's book **The English Language in Medieval Literature** (New York, 1979). It reminds us how much of the text in the editions we read is the creation of editors, a fact that has considerable bearing on "smoothness."

Another piece of reading which is cautionary in a different and unconscious way is the section on "Versification" in W. W. Skeat's **Oxford Chaucer** (Oxford, 1894), vol. VI, lxxxii ff. Here even a scholar of undoubted greatness sometimes confuses the rather abstract notion of meter with the practical business of reading verse aloud with style. His instructions for the correct oral reading of lines from both Goldsmith and Chaucer indicate a method of reading that is highly personal, not to say idiosyncratic to a modern eye or ear. It is possible that his method represents something acceptable to his contemporaries brought up on Tennyson; it is almost indisputable that nobody would now dream of reading Chaucer aloud with many of the stresses and pauses that Skeat suggests. His confident prescriptions illustrate cogently the danger of assuming that one knows in detail just how a piece of poetry ought to be read.

20. Henry Sweet, a great phonetician and the author of a **History of English Sounds** (Oxford, 1888) in which he also set out the evidence for ME phonology, wrote as follows in his **Primer of Spoken English** (Oxford, 1890): "The only real familiarity we can have is with the language we speak ourselves. As soon as we go beyond that, and attempt to determine how other people speak — whether by observation or questioning — we make ourselves liable to fall into the grossest blunders" (p. viii).

21. In his normalized edition of **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** (Baltimore, 1972) J. A. Burrow remarks optimistically that "the metrical form and expressiveness of the writing will survive even a modern pronunciation," Introduction, p. 7. Derek Brewer seems to succeed with his modern English version of a passage from the **Alliterative Morte Arthure** in the notes to his modified edition of Malory's text **The Morte Darthur**, Parts Seven and Eight (Evanston, Ill, 1974, p. 161).
