

ON MAKING AN EDITION OF THE
CANTERBURY TALES
IN
MODERN SPELLING

by Michael Murphy

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I want to question a couple of the most cherished scholarly and pedagogical habits in the study of Geoffrey Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales**: the universal practice (a) of printing the work in old spelling and (b) of reciting it in old pronunciation. And I am suggesting an alternative.¹

To make my point more easily, I should like to start with a question about Shakespeare.

Which of the pieces below is the authentic Shakespeare?

Sonnet 129

1. Mad in pursuit, and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme,
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe,
Before, a joy proposed, behind, a dream.
2. Made In pursut and in possession so,
Had, hauing, and in quest, to haue extreame,
A blisse in prooffe and proud a very wo,
Before a ioy proposd behind a dreame,
- 3 Made In purfut and in poffeffion fo, * 1
Had,hauing,and inqueft,to haue extreame,
A bliffe in prooffe and proud and very wo,
Before a ioy propofd behind a dreame,

¹* (#3 should be a photocopy of the Quarto which I am unable to reproduce exactly on screen. f has to be used for the long s).

Most of us have read number 1 in an edition entitled **Shakespeare's Sonnets** or something of that sort. But Shakespeare's contemporaries read this sonnet in number 3, which is different from 1 in a number

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of significant and insignificant ways. Among the significant differences are the spelling and the punctuation. The less significant one are the odd shape of some of the "s" 's that look like "f" 's; the broken letters; the use of "u" for "v" and vice versa, and perhaps a few others. The diplomatic edition (number 2) does not try to reproduce these oddities except for the u/v spellings. But otherwise it does reproduce exactly the spelling and punctuation of the Quarto. Booth's edited version (1) does not attempt to follow the spelling or the punctuation exactly, let alone the odd-shaped letters. Instead the editor adapts the spelling to modern conventions as far as possible, and punctuates in accordance with his judgment, using modern practice as his criterion.

Most people would rather read Booth's version of the four line above than the diplomatic reproduction of the Quarto version, let alone the photographic facsimile. The odd letters and old spelling have little to recommend them except quaintness, and that soon palls. We find the editorial convention preferable, almost essential; it is however, also misleading, for the editor's presence, much as we want it, easily creates the illusion that his is **the** text of Shakespeare or whoever. Throughout much of the nineteenth century the edition of the **Canterbury Tales** by Thomas Tyrwhitt (1775) was Chaucer fo many people. Late in the nineteenth century Tyrwhitt's place wa taken by Skeat, and from the 1930s Chaucer was Robinson. ³ While Robinson has remained Chaucer through three editions, many students have been brought up on one of the post-Robinson edition commonly used for undergraduates in universities, such as Baugh Donaldson, Howard, or Fisher.⁴ Which of those very different edi tions is the "real" Chaucer? Look at these three edited versions of the **Canterbury Tales**, A 66-74, 77-78, and then at the same passage un-edited from manuscript: ⁵

1. And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys;
And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.
But, for to tellen yow of his array,
His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.

.....
For he was late ycome from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrymage.

(Robinson)

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2. And everemore he hadde a soverein pris.
And though that he were worthy, he was wis,
And of his port as meeke as is a maide.
He nevere yit no vilainye ne saide
In al his lif unto no manere wight:
He was a verray, parfit, gentil knight.
But for to tellen you of his array,
His hors were goode, but he was not gay.

.....
For he was late come from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrimage.

(Donaldson)

3. And evermore he had a sovereign pris;
And though that he were worthy, he was wis,
And of his port as meek as is a maide.
He never yet no villainy ne saide
In all his life unto no manner wight.
He was a veray, parfit gentil knight.
But for to tellen you of his array,
His horse were goode but he was not gay.

.....
For he was late y-come from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrimage

(Howard)

Not counting punctuation, there are sixteen changes from Robinson to Donaldson and twelve changes from Donaldson to Howard. (Fisher has only two changes from Robinson).

4. *And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys;
And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.
But, for to tellen yow of his array,
His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.*

.....

For he was late ycome from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrymage.

{The above Dauphin font is a stand-in for the facsimile of the Hengwrt manuscript}

[p.51] 5. And euere moore / he hadde a souereyn prys
And thogh that he weere worthy / he was wys
And of his poort/. as meke / as is a mayde
Ne neuere yet/ no vileynye he sayde
In al his lyf/ vn to no manere wight
He was a verray porfit/ gentil knyght/
But for to tellen yow / of his array
Hise hors weere goode / but he ne was nat gay
.....
For he was laate / comen from his viage
And wente / for to doon his pilgrymage
(Hengwrt: diplomatic transcript in modern roman type)

6. And euer more he had a souereine prise
And þoughe þat he was worþi he was wise
And of his porte as meke as is a maide
He neuer 3it no velany seide
In al his life til no maner wyght
He was a verrey perfite gentil knyht
ffor to tel 3owe of his araye
His hors was goode bot he was nouhte gaye
.....
ffor he was late come fro his viage
And went for to done his Pilgrimage
(Lansdowne: transcript)

Which of these six is Chaucer? Each of them has been or is accepted as Chaucer. Can any or all of them be Chaucer, especially since the poet produced none of them?

The first three are from modern editions and are fairly like each other. Robinson's (number 1) reproduced the text of the Ellesmere Manuscript of the Canterbury Tales with whatever changes the editor deemed necessary for a variety of reasons, but kept the spelling of the manuscript. Donaldson (2) modified his predecessors' way of editing the text, to make it more accessible, subtitled his large and much-used volume *An Anthology for the Modern Reader*. After him came Howard (3), who went considerably further along the road of "normalization" than Donaldson. "Normalization" means at least an attempt to keep the same spelling of any given word

throughout, no matter how variously it was spelled in the manuscript(s). For example, if the word appears in the MSS as "fresshe, freisshe, fresche, freshe" at different points, the differences are ignored, and the word appears as "freshe." Donaldson said that he deliberately tried to keep the "look" of Middle English in his text, but his reasoning for his procedure is expressed in

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a way that seems remarkably confused for a scholar as perceptive and a writer as graceful as he was. ("Preface," iv). Howard, who, in addition, made an attempt to adapt to modern spelling where possible, was less concerned about the medieval "look" of his text, which, nevertheless, retains a marked "Middle English" appearance.

Numbers 4 and 5: These look quite different from 1, 2 and 3, and from each other. They represent the kind of documents that are the basis of any edition. Number 4 is a photographic facsimile of the Hengwrt MS; number 5 is a strict diplomatic copy of the same manuscript. That is, 5 is as exact a copy in print of 4 as is humanly possible; spelling, obsolete letters, punctuation, everything. Even the expansion of the scribe's contractions has been indicated by italics. In a real sense 4 and 5 are the same document. But only palaeographers can read 4 with any ease or confidence, whereas anyone fairly well versed in Middle English can read 5, which is, of course, made by a palaeographer. Number 6 is the same passage in another manuscript, the Lansdowne.

Each of these (1-6) has been or is accepted as "Chaucer," as I have said. Yet the differences are obvious and often quite serious. Clearly, then, "Chaucer" or "The Works of Chaucer" are expressions that cover a fairly wide range of possibilities. (I do not include translations, even creative ones like those of Dryden and Pope).

The text that I propose is different yet. In its ideal form it would have a text in the unedited old-spelling version of the Hengwrt MS faced by the same MS in new spelling and with modern punctuation, glossing, and annotation. In practice there should be about ten pages of dual-language text; the rest in the newspell version only, to be used by itself or side by side with a standard edition. The newspell version is not a translation and not simply a normalized text, but an edition of the MS itself in modern spelling, line for line, an edited transliteration which just takes the normalization process to its logical conclusion, and brings it into the late twentieth century. It is Chaucer in the same way as 1-6 are Chaucer, but to use Fredson Bowers's terms, this edition is not a "definitive text" for scholars, like Robinson's, or a scholar's "best text" edition; it is a "practical" edition for students and other educated readers who want to read Chaucer without being condescended to by a translation, but also without having to battle with Middle English forms and spellings which add little to the text except difficulty.

Think of some of the possibilities:

I. Students would no longer need to use a translation while they and we pretend they are reading only the original Middle English .⁷

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2. Students would learn something about where editions really come from, and perhaps participate in making one for a page or two

3. Teachers who wish to dwell on the details of Chaucer's pronunciation and metrics, and the contrasts with their modern "equivalents," would have ample evidence in the dual language text.

Let us look again at the extract cited above, but this time in Newspell:

And ever more he had a sovereign prize,
And though that he was worthy, he was wise
And of his port as meek as is a maid.
Ne never yet no villainy he said
In all his life unto no manner wight.
He was a very perfect, gentle knight.
But, for to tellen you of his array:
His horse was good, but he was got gay.

.....
For he was late y-come from his voyage
And went for to do his pilgrimage.

Now look at the difference between my newspell text and that Donald Howard, which is the closest to mine among the preceding. What is to be said for Howard's spelling usage as against mine? Quite a bit in some cases: "veray" may give the sense of "true," which doubt was still strongly in the word; "gentil" may rightly suggest qualities other than our "gentle." Moreover, his spelling avoids inevitable arguments about the implications of my spelling of "prize" and "voyage." A class interested in such things, and using side-by-side texts might profitably discuss such changes and the consequence of my decision to drop the "final e" of "wente," say. Is it different from that in most of the other words where the final "e" is dropped : "good "maide" or "saide"? Is "parfit" any better than "perfect" or "doon" than "do"? Similarly with my decision to make "horse" singular, as it is in the Lansdowne MS and about ten others. (This fact would be cited in a note.) Most extracts of ten lines or so will have much the same kind and percentage of change as the twelve between Howard's text and mine.

I am not quarreling with Professor Howard's text. I simply think that it is both wise and profitable to go a good deal further with his process, and to do for Chaucer what Shakespeareans have long done for Shakespeare. So, like the Shakespearean editors, I spell the words of the MS in our way as far as possible, and that is most of the time. In

my text, moreover, orthography is meant to imply phonology. That is, I spell the words modernly because I think they ought to be pro-

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nounced modernly wherever possible, and that is most of the time. In short, I have tried to produce a text which is Chaucerian in the same way that our classroom Shakespeare texts are Shakespearean: I have taken away where possible, and that is most of the time, features of the language which add little or nothing to the student's knowledge or appreciation of the text, like the old spelling in the words I listed just above. This leaves plenty of occasions when obsolete features are retained, not because they are quaint but because there is no alternative, as with obsolete words like "wight," or words with changed meanings like "port, villainy, gay"; or obsolete inflexions where those seem essential or useful for rhythm or rhyme, as with "tellen" and "y-come" in my version above.

"And wel we weren esed atte beste" becomes "And well we weren eased at the best." In the couplet "Of sundry folk by aventure y-fall / In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all" I have retained the past participle in y- ("yfall") because it helps the rhythm of the line. The use of "aventure" is a good deal less assured. But would "adventure" or "adventure" be better? This modern reflex means something rather different and the accent would be even more awkward.

Also, rather reluctantly, I have tended to reduce "-es" of ME plural nouns, and third-person singular present tense verbs to "-s," even if this interferes slightly with the smoothness of the rhythm. This would require readers with a dual text to make up their minds whether they prefer to read it one way or the other. Surely now, if ever, is the time to give intelligent readers of Chaucer not only the sacred text but a practical script, to let them be the directors as far as possible. Again, we still use the "-ed" in the past tense of most weak verbs, but readers of a modernized Chaucer text will often have to make up their own minds whether or not to pronounce it as a syllable, even if I, the editor, have put an accent where I think it might be pronounced. Florence Ridley's piece in Gibaldi refers to the Chaucerian ambiguity that "inveigles the reader into the creative process."⁸ She did not have my procedure in mind, of course, but I hope she and others would agree that this is one way of "inveigling" readers into the creative process with the invitation, tacit or explicit, to piece out imperfections with their thoughts.

For there will be imperfections, but they will be fewer and less serious than those in the current methods of editing for students, which assume that Chaucer's rhythms can be read, silently or aloud, only in Semblance, the reconstructed dialect that is supposed to be that of Chaucer's London.⁹ The good thing about Semblance is that the reader can almost always get a pentameter by changing an accent (the variable stress rule), or by dropping or retaining one of the many final

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"-e's" or "-es's" that abound on the page. And, more important for many, adherence to the principle of the Great Vowel Shift (GVS) will more often give a full rhyme. These are good things, no doubt, but they cost too much, since they require readers to master the rules of the GVS and rules for pronunciation of "final -e," and to adjust their ears to making sense of the resulting sounds. ¹⁰

The good thing about the method I am proposing is that it makes the text of Chaucer much more accessible to students and general readers without requiring them to learn the dubious phonetics of a reconstructed dialect, and without changing either Chaucer's vocabulary or syntax. In exchange for that, one has to surrender some of the comfort of regular pentameter and some of the satisfaction of full, bell-like rhyme. It is 1991, and we have been learning to do without rhyme in narrative verse since Milton's rude remarks about it, three hundred years ago. Surely our twentieth-century ears are less offended than Dryden's by an absence of "equality of numbers" or by the occasional absence of perfect rhyme, and are more attuned to the "rude sweetness" of modern verse without rhyme or equal measure. What our ears do not become any more attuned to is the "rudeness" of extended readings in a reconstructed dialect that no one has heard or spoken for centuries. This is one of the elementary differences between speech and writing: Chaucer's spoken language is forever gone, and nothing short of a Rosetta tape is ever going to show us how it was spoken or read by the poet or his contemporaries. Assurances to reader or student about the reasonable exactness of our pronunciation of Chaucer's Middle English are really idle, even though we can figure out that some features of that language are not features of ours: for example, the sounding of many now silent "-e's" and, roughly, the shape of the long vowels. These findings explain that Chaucer was neither as poor a metrist or as poor a rhymer as he appeared to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers, though he produced a fair number of lines that cannot be totally smoothed out even with "Middle English" pronunciation. ¹¹ Let us, most of the time when dealing with students, leave the old phonology and old orthography where they belong ---in scholars' texts and in histories of the language. We should feel obliged to use historical linguistics only in so far as it helps us to read and appreciate Chaucer's verse NOW. That seems to be where Shakespeareans leave it. They do not feel obliged to resurrect Shakespeare's spelling or reconstruct Shakespeare's pronunciation to bring out homonymic puns or to deal with the otherwise "bad" rhymes that infest the Sonnets. ¹²

But there is no point in pretending that the rhyme problem with Chaucer will not be more frequent than with Shakespeare and some-

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times more demanding: for example, *prize/fleur de lys— virtuous/hous — draught/raught—wine/sanguine—arise/service—Hubert/ beard—philosopher/coffer*. All of these and many others are hard to handle with a modern post-GVS pronunciation, even when we have used all our ingenuity and skill. We will have to settle for less than complete success. It is my conviction, nevertheless, that we will

come out well ahead. (See further pp. 58 - 59 below.)

The venerable academic custom of requiring students to memorize the first eighteen lines of the General Prologue goes back, no doubt, to Tyrwhitt, whose edition in 1775 set out for the first time a metrical analysis of these lines in order to show how the rhythm would benefit if silent "e's" were pronounced. We owe many good things to Tyrwhitt, but this academic custom is not one of them, though it is no fault of his. For one thing, this passage is probably the least typical run of eighteen lines in the whole of the Canterbury Tales in the sheer length of the "sentence" and the comparative complexity of the syntax. It is an opening rhetorical flourish uncharacteristic of the rest of the book, but because of Tyrwhitt's analysis and the conservatism of academic custom, it is probably the only thing many students remember of Chaucer, having been compelled to participate in this ancient rite.¹³ What few of us remember about Tyrwhitt and his little guide to reading Chaucer is that it involved none of the confusing outlines of Chaucerian phonology now thought essential in every edition. For this was before the discovery of the Great Vowel Shift. So how did this man, generally considered to be the first great editor of Chaucer, how did he read the verse of the poet he so much admired and served so well? Clearly he read the verse either aloud or to the inner ear, with the phonology of his educated eighteenth-century SouthEastMidland dialect, (a descendant of Chaucer's dialect), adding only the "feminine -e" and "-ed, -es" to fill out the line to a fairly firm "heroic" length, a feature rather more important to people brought up on Dryden and Pope than it should be to us. Tyrwhitt's Rules for reading Chaucer make it clear that he was very interested in a good rhythm; he seems to have been much less concerned about perfect rhyme ("Versification," Pt. III, par. 15ff.).¹⁴

But we, influenced by Ellis and Skeat more than we would perhaps admit, will do almost anything for a rhyme and a regular line in our poet, including reading him in a strange phonology. We use Ellis's heavy GVS structure to give us distorted long vowels, and Tyrwhitt's pronounced "-e" to give us a little Gallic explosion at the end of nearly everything. Together these tactics can give us almost perfect rhythm and rhyme. But they do so at too great a cost. My text, on the other hand, abandons the pursuit of perfect rhyme and rhythm, a Grail that

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eluded even the editor-scribe of Ellesmere; and it makes large gains in comprehensibility. We can have twentieth-century Chaucer as Tyi whitt had eighteenth-century Chaucer if modern Chaucerians do not insist on living in an earlier age, an insistence that comes of a compulsive conviction with three related parts:

1. That Chaucer wrote all his work to be read aloud.
2. That **he** read it all aloud.
3. That therefore **we** should read it all aloud, — and in *his* dialect.

The first was stated in what is probably its extreme form only fifteen years ago by F. W. Bateson, who opined that "out of the mass or morass of recent Chaucerian scholarship one certainty has emerged viz. that all the longer poems — and no doubt

some of the short one too—were written to be read aloud." ¹⁵ But this opinion is stated in more moderate form by lots of other people who ought to know fact from speculation of that order. It is heartening to see that this article of faith is being challenged by others besides myself, including some who would not agree with the rest of my argument. ¹⁶

There is indeed some evidence that Chaucer's writing might well have been influenced by the fact that in the semi-literate culture to which he belonged, much poetry was recited aloud from a text or from memory. And there is some internal evidence which suggest that **he** sometimes read his own poetry aloud to an audience. There is no overwhelming evidence of either. ¹⁷ But even if we knew that Chaucer wrote all his work with a listening audience in mind, and if we knew that he himself read aloud frequently, this would not mean that we should regularly or always do the same, and in his dialect. Shakespeare unquestionably wrote all of his plays to be spoken and acted for an audience. Yet we all read his plays without feeling obliged to reproduce the spoken dialects of Worcestershire or London in Shakespeare's day, which were markedly different from our own. But it is de rigeur to read Chaucer aloud and to ourselves in the reconstructed dialect that I have called Semblance. A visit to a conference or a glance at the essays in Gibaldi will quickly show how attached teachers of Chaucer are to this dialect which they themselves have learned from a book or from another teacher who himself learned it from a book which, in turn, was written by one who was no native of the English SouthEastMidlands of the fourteenth century and had never visited there. It is very strange that so many scholars have so much confidence in so extraordinary a system. ¹⁸

By contrast, we know a great deal more about Milton's pronunciation than we do about Chaucer's, because a number of people before and during Milton's time were writing about English pronunciation, some of them quite perceptively. But an hour with an article on Milton's pronunciation by an authority who has a good [p. 58] deal of contemporary evidence should convince anyone about the uncertainties of phonetic reconstructions based on the written records of earlier centuries. Eric Dobson, probably **the** authority on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English pronunciation, has just such a chapter on Milton's pronunciation, a chapter as well-written and as clear as papers on such topics ever get to be. ¹⁹ Yet the reader who comes away from Dobson's article with a good notion of how Milton should sound in his native dialect is gifted indeed. You have to spend a good deal more than an hour with Ellis and his successors, who had no such contemporary evidence as Dobson had, to get some notion of the arguments that led to the idea of the GVS and the practice of reading Chaucer aloud, which we so casually accept. ²⁰

No one feels obliged to try to reduce Dobson's well-informed and careful arguments into a system for speaking Milton's verse "properly" with Milton's own general early

seventeenth-century SouthEastMidland dialect. Not, at any rate, outside of a recording for the History of the English Language, which is appropriate enough. And, of course, most editors of Milton make no attempt to reproduce the spelling of the early editions. The reasons — mostly of rhyme and rhythm — for insisting that Chaucer's work is an exception to this kind of editorial practice have some plausibility; but they are simply not persuasive enough to require us to use the old spelling even in student editions, and to insist on the old pronunciation from the students.

But a newspell text will present some difficulties in rhyme and rhythm. Let us look at some of them.

Rhyme

Rym in English hath such skarsete ("Complaint of Venus," 80).
Rhyme in English hath such scarcity

It is clear that rhyme was a problem of some consequence for Chaucer, and it is an even greater problem for an editor of a modern spelling edition. Clearly some words rhymed for Chaucer that no longer rhyme for us. This is true for Shakespeare too, as our examples from the Sonnets have shown (see note 12), though in his case the instances are not so numerous. The sound changes between Chaucer's time and ours and between Shakespeare's time and ours are explained in a fairly satisfactory theoretical way by the Great Vowel Shift already mentioned. If the phonetic laws of this theory always functioned perfectly, if the long vowels had changed with absolute consistency, then we would have nothing to worry about; presumably the words that rhymed then would still rhyme even with a different sound. In fact, most of them do, and the number of rhymes that need the GVS to explain their defectiveness in modern English is comparatively small. More frequently one notices that the defectiveness in the modern

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rhyme is explained by the fact that the rhyming words are derived from French and, having become more thoroughly anglicized since Chaucer's time, are accented differently from their French equivalents: for example, "repentant," "licour," "pilgrimage," "digestible. Frequent also are the words pronounced with more syllables than we give them now: "nacioun," "confessioun," "absolucioun." These *-ioun / -ion* morphemes (from French and Latin) contain two syllables and are very common, and the bisyllabic pronunciation is something that survived in English verse at least until John Donne, where it occur quite frequently. These are features of Chaucer's language that were noted long ago by Tyrwhitt, who knew nothing of the GVS. Since a rather large number of the technical "oddities" of his verse are explained by something other than the GVS, it is strange that we have allowed it to dominate our way of looking at Chaucer's verse so that the phonological system constructed to accommodate it has become quite tyrannical.

So what shall we do with Chaucerian words in modern pronunciation when they do not always rhyme fully? First of all, as I have said we must make up our minds to something less than rhyming perfection. We will have eye rhymes, half rhymes or less:

breath/heath maid/said, seek/sick, one/anon, was/glass, physic/like, harlotries/thrice, serviceable/table ²¹ There will be rhymes that can be kept only by retaining a syllable no longer used, as in most of the *-ion* words. We may have to exaggerate a trifle, too, especially in words of Romance extraction like *case /sol-ace; age/pilgrimage*, where the *-ace/-age* syllables may be emphasized a bit more than they usually are in modern spoken English. In short, the "elisions, slurs, and hiatus" mentioned by Tyrwhitt and Baum (p. 63) will be only some of the array of legitimate devices that readers must use to make the poetry of Chaucer come alive in the later twentieth century.

Rhythm

It seems clear that in Chaucer's day some syllables were pronounced which are no longer pronounced. ²² This is deduced from the need to pronounce them if one is to get a fairly good iambic pentameter line which is presumed to be the norm. Thus:

1. An outridere that lovèd venerie (An outrider that loved venery);
2. Of smalè houndès hadde she that she fedde (Of small hounds had she that she fed);
3. Ful worthy was he in his lordès werre (Full worthy was he in his lord's war);
4. At metè wel y-taught was she with alle (At meat, well y-taught was she withal);
5. She leet no morsel from hir lippès falle (She let no morsel from her lips fall);
6. Ne wette hir fingres in hir saucè deep (Nor wet her fingers in her sauce deep);
7. That was hir chapéleyne and preestès thre (That was her chaplain, and priests three).

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If the marked syllables in the Middle English are not pronounced, the verse will, on occasion, "fail in a syllable," to use Chaucer's own expression (*House of Fame*, 1098), as it does in the newspell version above. So what is to be done?

If we prefer to read aloud in our own dialects from the old text, we can:

- a) ignore the extra syllable and accept the fact that the verse limps a bit sometimes, as the poet seems to have accepted it;
- b) relentlessly sound the -e-;
- c) compromise between a) and b): accept the extra syllable where nothing else will seem to do. If we use newspell alone we must either accept (a), or use every other device available to us: getting the extra syllable by "doubling" consonants in Continental style, or by pausing at the apt point, and by using other modifications that even Tyrwhitt in the eighteenth century and Baum in the twentieth have ascribed to Chaucer himself, as we have just said. For example:

"At Alexandria he was when it was won" (GP, 51). Elide or slur the final -a of "Alexandria" and pronounce the "he" as one does normally in conversation, with little or no aspiration, so that we get something like "At Alexandry was when it was won." Some other readings of lines from the *General Prologue*: "That of her smiling was full simpland coy" (119); "Upon a book in cloistralways to pore" (185); "And for to fastnis hood under .his chin" (195); "And fought(en) for our faith at Tramisene" (62). A crisp pronunciation of "t" in "fought" should make the -en on "foughten" unnecessary in a newspell text. "With locks curled as they were laid in press" (81). The combination of /ks/ in "locks" immediately followed by /k/ in "curled," if carefully pronounced should provide the extra syllable otherwise provided by "lokkes." The same should be true of "lists thrice" in the line "In lists thrice, and aye slain his foe." Indeed, this last gives us a memorable strong line composed solely of monosyllables. And surely "The tears of Helen [pause] and eke the woe" is better than "The terès of Elyne and eke the woo" (*Man of Law's Tale* 70, MS Pet.) or "The teris of Eleyne and the wo" (ibid. 70, MS E).

Unlike the pronounced "-è," the morpho-phonemes "-es, -ed" are still very much alive in English, though distributed differently: we say "churches," "passes," "batted," "faded" and such words with great frequency. And much metered poetry well into the nineteenth century used occasional accents over "-ed's" to get the rhythm right. But when one becomes accustomed to trying to make the line scan reasonably without always resorting to pronounced final "-è," "-ès" and "-éd," the invariable use of the other method begins to seem mechanical and unnecessarily artificial.²³ The kind of reading I am trying to illustrate here is, unfortunately, more easy to demonstrate than it is to describe. This, perhaps, is why

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Dryden could not accept the assurance of Speght, Chaucer's sixteenth-century editor, that his lines "although in divers places they seeme to to stand of unequal measures, yet a skilfull Reader, that can scan them in their nature, shall find it otherwise." Nor would he have bought Gascoyne's similar assurance that Chaucer's lines "being read by one that hath understanding" will work quite well.²⁴ It is odd in the twentieth century to be arguing partly in the words of the sixteenth that the teacher of Chaucer must still be a reader that hath understanding of equal and unequal measures, **and** a willingness to change.²⁵

NOTES

1. For objections to the old pronunciation see Michael Murphy, "On Not Reading Chaucer—Aloud," *Mediaevalia* 9 (1986 for 1983): 205-23. [Available on this website]. The present paper deals primarily with the case for new spelling, though there is some inevitable overlap.

2. # 1 and # 3 are taken from Stephen Booth, **Shakespeare's Sonnets** (New Haven, 1977), where the 1609 quarto version of the sonnets is faced by Booth's edited version. #2 is a diplomatic version of the Quarto; (#3 is a photocopy of the Quarto which I am unable to reproduce exactly on screen).

3. F. N. Robinson, **The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer** (Boston, 1st ed. 1933; 2nd ed. 1957; 3rd ed. [Benson et al.] 1987); Walter W. Skeat, **The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer**, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1894); Thomas Tyrwhitt, **The Canterbury Tales** (London, 1775).

4. Albert Baugh, **Chaucer's Major Poetry** (New York, 1963); E. Talbot Donaldson, **Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader**, 2nd ed. (New York, 1975); Donald Howard, **The Canterbury Tales: A Selection** (New York, 1969); John Fisher, **The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer**, 2nd ed. (New York, 1988).

5. Number 4 ("facsimile" of Hengwrt); number 5 (diplomatic version of Hengwrt) from Paul Ruggiers, **Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript, with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript** (Norman, Oklahoma, 1979). Number 6 is the text of the Lansdowne MS in **Six Text Edition of the Canterbury Tales**, Chaucer Soc. Pubs., First Series, ed F. J. Furnivall (Oxford, 1868-77).

6. Fredson Bowers, "Principle and Practice in Editing Early Dramatic Texts," **Textual and Literary Criticism** (Cambridge, Eng., 1959).

7. See Peter Beidler's lament, "Chaucer and the Trots: What to do about those Modern English Translations," **ChauR** 19 (1985): 290-301. His suggested remedies seem little more than wanhope.

8. Florence Ridley, in Joseph Gibaldi, ed., **Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's Canterbury Tales** (New York, 1980), xii.

9. "Semblance" is the name I have given to the dialect in which all Chaucerians are now taught to read the poet, a reconstruction of the SouthEastMidlands (SEM) of fourteenth-century England, to which no doubt it bears some resemblance. See footnote 1 [and preceding essay].

10. A. J. Ellis first set out the evidence for the Great Vowel Shift in **Early English Pronunciation**. 5 vols. (London, 1868-1871. Rpt. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968). This was the beginning of the fashion for reading Chaucer aloud exclusively

with reconstructed Middle English phonology. See footnote 1 above.

11. See the selection in Paull Baum, **Chaucer's Verse** (Durham, 1961), 64-65. Baum's general remarks on the real "irregularities" in Chaucer's verse are worthwhile reading. See more recently Thomas Ross, **The Miller's Tale**, Variorum Edition (Norman, Oklahoma, 1983), 59: "Present day scholarship has moved from the conviction that the poet always wrote regular iambic decasyllabic lines to the belief that his practices more nearly

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coincided with natural speech rhythms." If this is true, one wonders at the cool or even hostile reception of a book like Ian Robinson's **Chaucer's Prosody** (Cambridge, 1971). Ross continues, "M-R [that is, Manly-Rickert] put it most succinctly: 'Current theories of Chaucer's versification are based, not upon the text as found in the MSS, but upon an artificial text made by all the devices at the disposal of the scholar.'" For M-R see J. M. Manly and E. Rickert, **The Text of the Canterbury Tales**, 8 vols (Chicago, 1940).

My reservations are shared by Roger Lass and John Anderson: see **Old English Phonology** (Cambridge, Eng., 1975), 202-03. They are shared also by Angus McIntosh, Michael Samuels and their colleagues, the undisputed current experts on Middle English dialects. Let me cite briefly the latest statement from the latter group: "The attempt to infer information about the spoken language purely on the basis of documentary evidence is in fact a hazardous undertaking. Even to determine precisely which written variants are likely to be phonically significant. . . is far from easy. . . . To attempt a phonic interpretation of any piece of written Middle English is, beyond a certain point, misguided, because the graphic units are not designed to carry some bits of phonic information at all." See **A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English** (Aberdeen, 1986) 1.4.2, 1.4.3. Perhaps the "certain point" is Samuel's establishment beyond doubt that the "silent -e-" was often sounded in Chaucer's poetic dialect. See "Chaucerian Final '-E,'" **N & Q** 217 (1972): 445-48.

12. Here is a selection of rhymes from only the first twenty sonnets: *field/held glass/ was one/loan/none age/pilgrimage ear/bear herd/beard art/convert unset /counterfeit come/tomb brood/blood created/defeated are/prepare*. And so it goes throughout the whole sonnet series. Some of these rhymes will look familiar enough to Chaucerians.

13. In his farewell program Garrison Keillor, the radio personality, recited most of this passage which every graduate of Lake Wobegon H.S. has to know by heart. His rendering was a quaint mixture of modern Midwest and half remembered Semblance, a rendition that worked better than a strict Kokeritzian rendering could ever have done

for his audience in the world of entertainment. They were probably pleased and flattered by a little pleasant nostalgia about the long-gone classroom where they too had acquired a little arcane learning.

14. In Tyrwhitt's eighteenth-century London dialect some of the rhymes mentioned in footnote 6 may still have worked, at least for poetry: *ear/bear herd/beard art/convert created/defeated*. Also "-ed" was probably pronounced far more readily in verse than it was later. In some reprints of Tyrwhitt's "Versification," beginning in the nineteenth century, most of his remarks in part III are replaced by those of Skeat, who had a somewhat different set of Rules, and who also had nothing to say about rhyme before the appearance of Ellis's book.

15. F. W. Bateson, "Could Chaucer Spell?" **EIC** 25 (1975): 2-24 and 391-93 (5).

16. Notably and in detail by John Fisher in "Chaucer and the Written Language," **The Popular Literature of Medieval England** (Knoxville, 1985), 237-51, who finishes his article thus: "Chaucer was in the mainstream of the development of written expression in English. He capitalized on this fortunate situation to produce some of the earliest literature in English addressed more directly to the eye than to the ear, to the individual reader than to a listening audience" (249). See also Derek Pearsall, "The Troilus Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience," **YES** 7 (1977): 68-74. And see Derek Pearsall, **The Canterbury Tales** (Boston, 1985): "the supposed practice by which Chaucer would read his poems aloud to the court is irrelevant to The Canterbury Tales" (294-95).

17. See Ruth Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," **Speculum** 11 (1936): 88 - 110, and "Chaucer and the Custom of Oral Delivery," **Speculum** 13 (1938): 413-32. Bertrand Bronson, "Chaucer's Art in Relation to his Audience," **Five Studies in Literature**. Ed. Bronson et al. (Berkeley, 1940). Also Joerg Fichte, who points out summarily that the certainties induced by these earlier articles about Chaucer's audience and public readings are no longer so certain: "Further Reading," in Piero Boitani and Jill Mann, ed., **The Cambridge Chaucer Companion** (Cambridge, Engl., 1988), 247-48.

18. The occasional questioning of it sometimes leads to odd results, as with Emerson Brown's comments in "Diverse Folk Diversely They Teach" in Joseph Gibaldi, 63-75, where he says that "everyone agrees" that we should teach students the sounds of [p. 63] Middle English. Then he comes as close as anyone I have seen in print to confessing the near impossibility of doing that accurately, but finally retreats to the old position, requiring the students to speak Chaucer's lines "in the way we like to think that Chaucer might have wished them to sound" (70).

19. Eric Dobson, "Milton's Pronunciation," **Language and Style in Milton**, ed. R. D. Emma and John Shawcross (New York, 1967), 154-74.

20. One should pay special attention to the easily forgotten admissions that occur often enough in Ellis, **Early English Pronunciation**. See, for example, chap. I, especially pp. 22 -23, the two paragraphs beginning "Nobody. . . "; and p. 27, the paragraph beginning "Much uncertainty. . . ." Also Pt. III, chap. VII, p. 677: "The application of the results of Chapter 4 to the exhibition of the pronunciation of the prologue has been a work of great difficulty, and numerous cases of hesitation have occurred where analogy alone could decide." At the end of "the few hints for practice reading" is the following counsel (679): "If the reader will bear these directions in mind and remember to pronounce with a general broad tone, rather Germanesque or provincial, he will have no difficulty in reading out the following prologue. . . ." This is a description worthy of a sixteenth-century orthoepist, and might be a reasonable way of describing many of the readings one hears at twentieth-century conventions.

21. With regard to these we might keep in mind that precisely the same rhyme as the final one just mentioned occurs as the last rhyme, a very strong position, in Milton's "Morning of Christ's Nativity": *stable / serviceable*. Other difficult "rhymes" of the sort occur abundantly in the poetry of John Donne without creating much stir among donnovans: *room / come*, *West / East*, *Jerusalem / them*, *lord / word*, *are / Gibraltar*, *crown / own / down* — all from "Hymn to God my God in my Sickness," a short poem. Or, in three consecutive lines in "The Good Morrow": *gone / shown / one*.

22. I use "pronounced" without implying that I am speaking (sic) only of Chaucer being read aloud. Clearly we try to make poetry scan and rhyme even in our own private silent reading.

23. Modern editions of Shakespeare are interesting here. They seem quite relentless in their editing of "-ed": the Arden uses an apostrophe to indicate an "-ed" not "pronounc'd"; otherwise it assumes that a final "-ed" is pronounced. The New Cambridge uses a grave accent over the "-èd" it wants pronounced. See Philip Brockbank, **The New Cambridge Shakespeare: Editorial Guide and Specimen Pages** (Cambridge, Engl., 1979).

24. Caroline Spurgeon, **Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion** (Cambridge, 1925), xxvii-xxviii.

25. An interesting precedent in modernization is presented by a number of different editions of Arthurian works in English. Malory's **Morte Darthur** is easier to read in either its Caxton or Vinaver version than Chaucer is. Yet D. S. Brewer has found it worthwhile to modernize thoroughly for his edition in the York Medieval Texts,

designed for undergraduates in British universities. The result is clearly the best text for all but professional medievalists: **Malory: The Morte Darthur** (Evanston, 1974).

Strangely enough, John Finlayson's edition of the much more difficult **Alliterative Morte Arthure** (1967) for the same series gives a text that differs little from that of E. Brock made a hundred years before: **Morte Arthure**, EETS, OS 8 (Oxford, 1871), whereas Larry Benson's edition of that text is considerably, though not completely, modernized: **King Arthur's Death** (Indianapolis, 1974).

A version of the" alliterative poem that does totally modernize — and very successfully — is a passage of about twelve lines in Brewer's note to his Malory text (161). Equally instructive is a comparison of Benson's half-modernized text of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* in **King Arthur's Death** with a critical edition such as that of P. F. Hissiger, **Le Morte Arthur** (The Hague, 1975). The text presents the modernizer with some of the problems that Chaucer's does, especially in the rhymes. Benson seems, however, to want to preserve medieval phonology with the modernized spelling, adding macrons, dots, and cedillas to guide the reading.

Also very well worth looking at as exercises in modernization are editions of medieval drama by Richard Beale and Pamela King, **York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern**

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Spelling (Oxford, 1984); R. T. Davies, **The Corpus Christi Play** (Totowa, N.J., 1972);

J. S. Purvis, **The York Cycle of Mystery Plays** (London, 1957); John Russell Brown, **Complete Plays of the Wakefield Master** (London, 1983).

For our purposes at least, their varying views about how much to modernize are probably even more instructive than those of the Shakespeareans.