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Abstract

Chaucer's poetic works are full of references to sound and music, incorporated variously as part of thematization, characterization, and rhetorical structure. Attending to Chaucer's repeated interest in sound in his poetry allows scholars and students to consider how the field of literary sound studies can provide another point of access for students as they become acquainted with and interrogate Chaucer's poetry. For those interested in trying this approach to teaching Chaucer in the college classroom, this essay provides resources for instructors and students, including an overview of the field of literary sound studies, its intersection with Chaucer's poetry, and two sample activities for use in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

In *The Prioress's Tale*, Chaucer's young schoolboy learns how "to syngen and to rede" in his local school, as he "herkned ay the wordes and the noote" (Chaucer 1987, ll. 500 and 521).[1] We learn two things from this quotation. One, that Chaucer is attentive to music in ways that we might not have appreciated enough. And two, music was an important part of classroom instruction in Chaucer's time. Indeed, Chaucer's poem suggests an interdisciplinary pedagogical model that we might follow today.

Chaucer's repeated interest in sound—musical or otherwise (from prosodic elements to the explicit use of music as a major theme in a given text)—invites scholars and students to approach his poetry through the lens of sound studies. Sound Studies can offer our students interpretive tools for exploring rhetorical structure, characterization, and individual and cultural identity and for thinking about their own historic and cultural moment. For those interested in trying this approach to teaching Chaucer in the college classroom, the following essay provides a guide, including an overview of the field of literary sound studies and its intersection with Chaucer's poetry, an explanation of two sample activities I developed and have used repeatedly in my own undergraduate and graduate classes, and a brief bibliography of relevant sound studies resources for instructors and students.

Sound Studies Theory: A (very) Brief History from Acoustics to Literature

I initially came to this approach because it was a fascinating (to me) merging of my undergraduate degree in musicology and my graduate work in medieval comparative literature. I almost couldn't help but put the two fields of literature and music (and sound more broadly) in conversation with one another. When I read works by Chaucer and others in my medieval literature graduate seminars, the musical references jumped out at me. There was often a clear pattern to them, a rhetorical and narrative significance. For example, after I read *The Canterbury Tales* for the first time as a graduate student, I saw that one way in which *The Miller's Tale* responds to *The Knight's Tale* is through a recapitulation of the musical structure and key musical moments in *The Knight's Tale*, a rhetorical move that links them structurally as well as thematically. And yet, those classroom discussions rarely went into depth. When I subsequently came across scholarship on sound studies as a field and theory, it reinforced the validity of how I had been reading Chaucer and his contemporaries and provided a clear methodology for the interpretive work I'd begun.

R. Murray Schafer's watershed monograph, *The Tuning of the World* (1977) introduced the concept of "the soundscape" and inaugurated the interdisciplinary field of sound studies (Schafer, 3–4 and 9–10). Schafer calls for the formation of this new field of study and privileges sound as an understudied and yet key means by which humans experience and interpret daily life. For example, Schafer begins his argument by highlighting sound studies' inherently interdisciplinary nature, as "the middle ground between science, society, and the arts" (Schafer, 4). The book then proceeds in four parts: the first two parts survey the soundscape throughout history, with a primary focus on the Western world; the third presents a methodology for analyzing the soundscape; and the fourth turns to acoustic design as

[1] All Chaucer references are to Chaucer 1987.

a means of managing the soundscape. Throughout, Schafer defines new terminology as a starting point for researchers and repeatedly asserts, as he does in the introduction, that this field is concerned "about sounds that matter" (Schafer 12). After Schafer, the field of sound studies expands further, to include not only the arts and sciences, but the humanities as well. Throughout this growth, the core idea of the discipline has remained fairly stable—as two sound studies scholars noted in 2015, "[s]ound, then, is a substance of the world as well as a basic part of how people frame their knowledge about the world," or, in a paraphrase of Schafer: sounds matter (Novak and Sakakeeny 2015, 2).

Developments in this field over the past several decades have brought sound studies into thoughtful conversation with medieval studies. While scholarship on medieval sound studies remains a bit niche, medieval studies has made space for precisely this sort of interdisciplinary, synesthetic, and sometimes even multi-modal inquiry. For example, in her introduction to a cluster on sound studies in *Speculum*, Susan Boynton (2016) asserts that, "[i]n the literature of the Middle Ages…sound can become the subject as well as the substance of the text" (998). She further notes, "Sound matters in these texts, as in others, because it is central to our experience of the world" (2016, 1002). Chaucer's approach to literary sound aligns with Boynton's statements. When we take Chaucer's soundscapes seriously his texts open-up—soundscapes expand our ability to interpret them and, importantly, provide additional points of access, interrogation, and interest for our students as they seek to span the six-century gap between themselves and Chaucer.

Where and How to Begin

If we choose to approach Chaucer's works from the perspective of sound studies, we are gratifyingly in luck in that we neither have to look too far or research too deeply in order to be well-situated to conduct this sort of reading. Thankfully, Chaucer wasn't a trained musician—he did not compose motets to go with his poetry, as did his contemporary, Guillaume de Machaut. And he wasn't a deeply engaged sonic and music theorist. Rather he was a well-educated writer, engaging with commonly accepted music and sound theory of his time, writing for an audience of moderately- to well-educated readers, similarly aware of the music, sonic experiences, and general ideas about the impact of sound on interpretation which framed their daily lives. Perhaps most important for our understanding of Chaucer and his original audience, is recognizing the place of music in medieval education. In fourteenth-century England, to be well-educated meant to be educated in the seven liberal arts, divided into two parts: the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the quadrivium (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy). These seven fields of study formed the basis of the curriculum from elementary cathedral schools through university programs (Orme 2006, 79–85). With this curricular foundation, anyone who was educated in fourteenth-century England would have known something about music and music theory, even if they weren't themselves professional musicians.

Despite the changes in curricular structure from the medieval period to our own, we and our students may likewise set down the pressure to be experts and instead read casually alongside Chaucer and his original audience. We may not recognize the cultural significance of every reference to sound

in his texts—some part of that necessarily remains lost to the time before digital sound recording devices—but we can at least see how far writing as a sound-recording technology will get us.

What do students and instructors need to know in order to get started with this multi-modal interpretive work? Neither students nor instructors need to be specialists in Chaucer or music. Students can walk into a first-year seminar having never read any of Chaucer's works, having no experience with music theory, acoustics, singing or playing an instrument, or medieval views on these subjects. Students can leverage their own daily experiences with sound and music in all kinds of seemingly mundane ways (their favorite music streaming apps, watching and listening to films, the sounds indicative of the spaces and places and people around them, etc.) to acknowledge that sound (and music) inform their daily lives and rhetorical experiences in myriad ways. Even silence and deafness are components of the sonic world we all inhabit, and have inhabited throughout human history. As such, students already know, even if they aren't typically mindful of it, that sound matters in all kinds of interesting ways around them, including in literature.

While students can walk in with no background, as instructors we may want or need to be a little more prepared, though not necessarily by much. A background in musicology, or acoustics, or any other sonic field is not at all necessary to be able to teach Chaucer (or any other author) from the perspective of literary sound studies. Just like our students, most of us are already accustomed to sound as a means of interpreting the world around us, including the texts we read. So, before turning to the two sample activities, I offer two ways for instructors to prepare.

Option 1: Avoid overpreparation when time is short. Read the Chaucerian text(s) you've chosen to prepare for class with an attentiveness to sonic aspects of theme, characterization, diction, poetic prosody, and/or overall structure or form. In class, open with a broad question about the sonic, such as, "What are some of the apparent cultural and narrative significances of song in *The Prioress's Tale*? Where does it show up, and what does it seem to do or mean?" Then join your students as you work through an exploration of the sonic together.

Option 2: Lean in when you can. If you add just a little more background research to the first method, you'll be well situated. Having done some of your own background reading and perhaps assigning a sound studies article or book chapter for your students to read alongside their literary reading for the day, you might begin by asking them how the article changed, challenged, or informed their understanding of the text. For example, I might ask my students to read Boynton's "Sound Matters" essay alongside *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. In class, I could then lead with her quotation about sound being "central to our experience of the world" (Boynton 2016, 1002), and ask students to find and then discuss moments in the tale where sound is central to the experience of (and thus our understanding of) the farmyard world Chaucer creates.

Whichever preparation option you choose (or time allows), the following activities are designed to be adaptable and scalable, for ease of implementation.

Activity 1: Visible Song in Manuscript Variance of *The Parliament of Fowls*

In either a lower-division British Literature survey course or an upper-division undergraduate Chaucer course, the following activity involves students in comparing the modern, edited version of

The Parliament of Fowls they've read for class, with three important manuscript examples of the poem: Cambridge University Library, MS Gg. 4.27, fol. 480v–90v; Bodleian Library, MS Fairfax 16, fol. 120r–29v; and British Library, MS Harley 7333, fol. 129v–32v. The focus of the comparison is the final song sung by the birds to conclude Nature's Parliament, in lines 673–693 of the critical edition of the poem, the concluding tumult of which awakens the narrator from his dream vision and leads to the abrupt ending the poem (ll. 694–700).

These three manuscripts each depict this final song in significantly different ways and are representative of the various ways this moment is handled across the fourteen extant manuscripts of the poem. One simply includes the full lyrics of the birds' song within the body of the poem (Cambridge University Library, MS Gg 4.27, fol 490v). Another says the birds sing a rondeau, does not include the lyrics, and then inserts a line of French text in red, placed between the last two stanzas of the poem, that may either be a tune name or a line of lyrics found in several contemporary French secular songs (including extant songs by two of Chaucer's contemporaries, Guillaume de Machaut and Eustache Deschamps) (Bodleian Library, MS Fairfax 16, fol. 129v). The third of this set includes just the poetic lines (ll. 673 and 675) that say the birds sang a rondeau that was made in France, leaves a blank space in the text-column roughly the size of a stanza, and then ends the poem not with the generally accepted final stanza, but with a stanza praising Lydgate (British Library, MS Harley 7333, fol. 132v). Modern editions almost always either follow the first example, or they offer a composite ending (as the Broadview Anthology does) with the birds' lyrics and the line of French text. This editorial practice effectively obscures the variation evident in the manuscript tradition regarding how to handle this moment of interdisciplinary, musico-literary significance. This variation in the manuscript tradition at such a critical moment in the poem has led to a great deal of debate regarding Chaucer's intentions at this point in the poem, but even setting those debates aside, if we accept the birds' concluding song as intentional, how it is presented can make a significant difference in how we read the poem as a whole with regard to arguments about authority, agency, love, and Boethian consolation.

I have found that teaching this assignment in lower-division and upper-division undergraduate courses requires some adjustment. In an upper-division course, specifically a dedicated Chaucer course, I have students read *The Parliament* in Middle English, though I also supply a modern translation to help them, if needed. In lower-division courses I flip this, expecting students to read the modern translation while also providing the Middle English so they can view the two together. *The Parliament* is a short enough poem that it is easily read and discussed over one or two class periods, while also being rich enough to support a range of critical methods and interpretations. To be sure, Chaucer is not solely concerned with poetically representing specific tenets of medieval music theory here; *The Parliament* nevertheless remains a work engaged with music both as one of many themes or subjects in it as well as in its substance or structure. It is also a work often studied in terms of Boethius's *De consolatione*, which is itself a musico-poetic work in many ways. Because of the close connection between *The Parliament* and *De consolatione*, for upper-division undergraduate courses, I also assign excerpts from *De consolatione* in translation, typically Books 1 and 2, as background reading for context and source studies ahead of this activity.

Comparing the end of the edited *Parliament* with these three manuscripts works well as either an in-class project or a homework assignment. When assigning this as homework, I also require the

students to submit a brief reflection paper, focusing on the experiences they have with the manuscript studies, archival, and paleographic aspects of the assignment. Either mode works well, but I typically opt to conduct this as an in-class activity. One benefit of doing this activity in class is guiding the students through the manuscript studies and paleographic challenges of the assignment—a part of their development as literary scholars that can sometimes be difficult to incorporate into general coursework. As this is also my preferred mode, I will outline the activity below as an in-class project.

First, I introduce the scholarly tradition of reading *The Parliament* as a Boethian poem generally and then present the musico-literary puzzle posed by the final scene of the dream vision, across the manuscript tradition itself. I do not specify the different ways each of the three manuscripts present the birds' final song, but simply say there's a range of approaches evident that may change how we read and interpret this moment in the poem. Either individually or in groups, depending on the number of students, I assign the students one of the three extant manuscripts commonly referenced by modern editors of *The Parliament*. As noted above, I like to use Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 4.27, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16, and British Library Harley MS 7333, and provide them with access to these final lines of the poem via either digitized or facsimile versions (see the Works Cited for suggested facsimile editions and links for the digitized manuscripts). Conveniently, while good facsimile editions are available for both the Cambridge and Bodleian manuscripts, digitized versions of all three of these manuscripts are available through their respective library's websites. I find it most helpful to share links to the digitized versions with my students or print images for them to work with on this activity. For additional help to my lower-division students, I also provide a transcription of the final three stanzas of the poem for each manuscript. With manuscript image and transcription side-by-side, along with their modern translation, these students are still able to engage with the manuscript itself without getting too stuck on the variations in letterforms, lack of punctuation, variation in wording, and similar issues that add to the delightful puzzle of working with manuscripts.

The key question for my students' study is: What is happening with this song in the material history of the poem and how does that relate to the rhetorical and narrative function of music in a poem that is a recasting of Boethian consolation? To get to that, they first consider the following questions: How is the birds' song present in the manuscript (or absent)? How does that clarify or obscure the role of this song and the birds at this point in the poem? If all they read is the manuscript version, how would that change their understanding of this moment in the poem and of the poem as a whole? The students work through this portion of their manuscript, comparing it to the composite edited version we've read for class, and consider how the modern edition aligns with or varies from the manuscript evidence. Each group (or student) then shares their findings with the class, which allows for the compilation of a mini-survey of the various ways these three manuscripts address the birds' final song.

Each version, including the modern edition, effectively depicts a different level of engagement with the music itself, a change that impacts how a reader interacts with the music of the birds' song, and the birds themselves as singers, potentially leading to vastly different interpretations of this musical climax of the poem. Keep in mind that in class discussions my students and I only get to this final song, which serves as a musical climax in the *Parliament*, after discussing the overall trajectory of music apparent in the poem. Two other key moments in this trajectory include the depiction of the music of the spheres as described in the dreamer's account of the Dream of Scipio (the spheres are the "welle

[source] ... of musik and of melodye" [l. 62]), and the abundant sounds and music in Venus's garden and temple (including ll. 190–203), not to mention the various other sounds attributed to the birds during their parliament. Given this musical arc in the narrative, the congress of birds singing together in harmony at the end falls in line with these other specific and elaborated musical references. When the birds' voices are included, when the lyrics to the song appear as in the Cambridge manuscript, then they take on more authority, offering a reliable voice of response to the Dream of Scipio and the classical lovers in Venus's garden.

My students have noted the potential change in authority and import based on how this song is depicted in the various manuscripts and modern editions. For example, students have expressed that merely saying that the birds sing a French song leads them to privilege the Continental influence on this part of the poem, perhaps in this case via bird migration, rather than the musical nature of either the birds or the song. Others have suggested that including the full text of the lyrics in the body of the poem situates this not only as a song the reader may remember (thus allowing readers to layer in their own associated connotations as they interpret this moment in the text), but places the birds themselves as the singers, potentially changing our view of them as authorities on music, or on love, for that matter. I conclude this activity by looking outward, with a class discussion on the choices made by the editor of the edition they read for class, and how studying the manuscript tradition can complicate, or rather deepen, our understanding and interpretation of this text in ways that modern editions may obscure.

Activity 2: Literary Soundscape Survey

I initially created the following activity for a graduate seminar I developed focused on Literary Soundscapes (a theory-based English MA seminar focusing on the field of sound studies in relation to literature). Since that first classroom experience, I have incorporated this activity, with some variations, in both introductory courses for undergraduate English majors and minors, as well as graduate seminars on other topics. These are typically courses that are not solely or specifically focused on Chaucer, but instead take a very broad view, with readings from ancient to modern British and world literature, therefore students are not required to read the Chaucer texts in Middle English, though they could if they chose.

I have found it both feasible and valuable to assign a freshman-level or upper-division cohort a scaled-down, introductory version of this assignment. This has been successful in both an early period British Literary Survey course for English majors and a General Education course on early period World Literature. In these cases, students read a Chaucer text ahead of class, like *The Knight's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale*, *The Prioress's Tale*, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, or *The Parliament of Fowls*; they are then given class time in pairs or larger groups to review the text and conduct what I call a Literary Soundscape Survey, a targeted analysis of the text in terms of the sonic.

The basic task is first, to compile a list of every sonic or musical reference in the text; second, to categorize the types of sonic references; and third, to draw some conclusions relating this unique literary soundscape to the narrative and interpretive aspects of the given text. Depending on the size

of the class and time available, I may divide the text into sections and assign each group a shorter section to work through. In this version, no background reading on the theory of sound studies is necessary. The ensuing discussion may not be as extensive or deep as it would be in a course where students had previously developed a more rigorous understanding of sound studies theory and Chaucer's sources, but that's just fine. I find that students enjoy the opportunity to focus on an aspect of the literature they often gloss over as they read ("yes, birds sing," "ah, the name of a song I don't know," "sound of the wind—got it"). Whatever they may have thought of the sonic elements during their initial reading, they proceed with this assignment assuming the sonic and musical references are there for a reason and their task is to determine what that reason might be.

In the graduate seminar, because of the time needed for research, this is a homework assignment, concluding with a 15–20 minute, in-class presentation where each student teaches the class about their chosen text and findings. In preparation for the assignment (which comes in the final third of the semester, after we've built a shared foundation of sound studies as a literary theory and read a range of literature together from that perspective), students are assigned the first three books of Chaucer's *Boece* (included in *The Riverside Chaucer* [1987] and *The Norton Chaucer* [2019]), the first three books of Boethius' *De consolatione* (in translation; widely available online or in a variety of accessible print versions), and Book I of Boethius' *De musica* (in translation; my favorite modern English translation is Calvin Bower's now-out-of-print edition, *Fundamentals of Music* [Boethius 1989], which may be available in your university library or through interlibrary loan; otherwise there are some workable, though not always as reliable, translations available online). I pair Chaucer with Boethius in this assignment for two main reasons. First, throughout the Middle Ages, Boethius's *De musica* was considered the primary, foundational music-theory text and was required reading in the quadrivium (Christensen 2018, 360-61). Second, we know Chaucer was familiar with Boethius both from his translation of *De consolatione* in *Boece*, as well as from the multitude of other direct and indirect references to Boethius in many of his works.

Having completed this background reading, my graduate students participate in class discussions applying the theory of sound studies to these three texts, with a focus on situating these three in terms of their sonic (including musical) themes and the sonically informed relationship between form, narrative, and interpretation. My students typically bring up aspects like:

- The unique genre of prosimetrum as it combines prose and poetry in a way evocative of a similar intermingling of rhetoric and music (*De consolatione*).
- Chaucer's intriguing decision not to include any poetry in his translation of *De consolatione* (*Boece*) and instead write only in prose.
- The connection between how Boethius privileges hearing as a means of understanding (*De musica*, Book 1) with the instruction Lady Philosophy gives the narrator to attend to both Rhetoric and Music as a means of finding consolation (*De consolatione* and *Boece*, Book 2, Prosa 1).
- Points of Boethian music theory that strike them as readily transferrable to literary incorporations of music, including the categorization of music and musicians into three types, the theory of music as an organizing/ordering principle, and the affective capacity of music (*De musica*, Book 1).

Following this discussion, and with a shared understanding of how literary sound theory is working across these three texts, I then task my students with selecting another Chaucer text of their choice, reading it on their own, conducting a Literary Soundscape Survey, as described above, and then presenting their findings to the class.

In either variation, I consider this assignment indicative of the type of early-stage analysis a scholar would need to conduct in order to develop an argument about the function of sound in a given literary text. For my undergraduate students, this is an opportunity to try out a particular theoretical lens, and expand their sense of the kinds of research questions they might bring to bear on a text. For my graduate students, this activity often serves as a preparatory step in their research for their final seminar papers. The process involved in this assignment requires that my students engage in a range of tasks. They must first survey and account for all the pertinent instances of sound in the work, whether that is a fleeting reference to the vague "melodye" (l. 872) that accompanies Theseus' triumphal return to Athens in *The Knight's Tale*, or, later in the same tale, the extended description of Arcite's love-lorn song for Emelye, which includes lyrics (ll. 1509–1512). Next students must categorize the instances of sound they have found—are some musical, natural, supernatural, a function of voicing, melodious, cacophonous, evocative of silence, etc. They must then prioritize these instances in the context of the text as a whole, with some instances likely being more important than others. Some may constitute mere background while others drive characterization, narrative, or rhetorical structure. And finally, they must bring all this information together with their understanding of the text. They must consider how our awareness of and attentiveness to the text's soundscape impacts how we read and interpret the text, or how the author composed and meant for the text to be read and understood.

One of the payoffs I see with this activity is that this process demonstrates to my students that literary sound studies, or the idea of a literary soundscape, isn't really a new, emerging theory. Sound studies is a relatively young field, yet conducting this study of Chaucer's deep literary engagement with sound in the fourteenth century helps students recognize the long history of human fascination with sound. At the same time, this activity allows my students to see how they're recovering and working at the vanguard of our understanding of this field.

To be fair, in its graduate seminar variation, this is the more complicated assignment of the two I've outlined here, and in this iteration, requires more background work for both the students and the instructor teaching it. That is in part by design, as I have sought to present two sample activities that can be adjusted to fit a range of instructors and students as well as a variety of undergraduate and graduate-level courses. Additionally, these sample activities can be adjusted to progress in difficulty in line with instructor and/or student interest and ability. This is a progression that has worked for me, but at the same time, it is not requisite.

A Chaucerian Coda

These activities and others like them enable me to teach Chaucer from a multi-modal and sensorially-based framework, in addition to the other, standard ways I also present Chaucer to my students, including through the theoretical lenses of formalism, historicism, cultural studies, feminism and gender studies, race and ethnicity studies, etc. While there isn't really a "best" way to teach

Chaucer, my students, particularly undergraduates, often find many literary theories to be elusively abstract and conceptual. The exciting (cool?) thing about this literary sound studies approach is that it engages multiple senses and leverages a way of interpreting and experiencing the world with which most students are already deeply familiar—they're so used to throwing on some headphones and curating their own daily music, listening to soundtracks in films, and reading and experiencing multi-modal works online. As I help them bring that understanding and those processes of interpretation to bear on medieval texts, the movement from abstract theory to concrete literary experience and interpretation often feels more tangible to my students. They tend to get excited about it and, as a result, tend to retain more of the conceptual theoretical framework from this approach that they can then effectively translate to other coursework and research.

With each of these activities, the most significant educational outcome rests in the way in which the students discover that attending to a facet of the text that they may not have previously noticed can change their reading of that text. This is a valuable lesson for them to learn. It is a lesson that may indeed lead students of English literature to other ways of interrogating a text or other culturally salient object/experience with which they are initially uncomfortable or unfamiliar—ways of reading, ways of teaching, ways of making meaning of and through literature that push their thinking and expand their understanding. After all, if we achieve little else, this is what many of us are after as scholars and teachers. Let me conclude by just encouraging you to give it a try. See what traction you get and what avenues for interpretation or readerly experience sound may open up for your students.

Appendix

The following sampling offers resources for sound studies more generally, as well as for medieval sound studies and Chaucer. These resources provide accessible introductions to the broader field of sound studies and the theory of literary sound studies in the medieval period, and they demonstrate how these concepts may be applied to several specific Chaucerian texts. I have had good success with assigning many of these resources (or parts of them) as background reading in my courses. While certainly not comprehensive, the list may, I hope, orient you and your students for this work.

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