

“All their ioynts & properties”: Orthography and Sound in Early English Poetry

David Hadbawnik

Blog post published April 25, 2016 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/adbfj-e0551>

Abstract

Each of the essays in this month’s “Medieval Sound” forum focuses on sound as it, according to Steve Goodman’s essay “The Ontology of Vibrational Force,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, “comes to the rescue of thought rather than the inverse, forcing it to vibrate, loosening up its organized or petrified body (70). These investigations into medieval sound [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Digital Humanities, Digital Media, Medieval Sounds, Poetry/Poets, Recording



Recommended citation

Hadbawnik, D. (2016, April 25). “All their ioynts & properties”: Orthography and Sound in Early English Poetry. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/adbfj-e0551>

Copyright

Copyright © David Hadbawnik 2016. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Each of the essays in this month’s “Medieval Sound” forum focuses on sound as it, according to Steve Goodman’s essay “The Ontology of Vibrational Force,” in [The Sound Studies Reader](#), “comes to the rescue of thought rather than the inverse, forcing it to vibrate, loosening up its organized or petrified body (70). These investigations into medieval sound lend themselves to a variety of presentation methods loosening up the “petrified body” of academic presentation. Each essay challenges concepts of how to hear the Middle Ages and how the sounds of the Middle Ages continue to echo in our own soundscapes.

The posts in this series begins an ongoing conversation about medieval sound in *Sounding Out!*. Our opening gambit in April 2016, “Multimodality and Lyric Sound,” reframes how we consider the lyric from England to Spain, from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries, pushing ideas of openness, flexibility, and productive creativity. We will post several follow-ups throughout the rest of 2016 focusing on “Remediating Medieval Sound.” And, HEAR YE!, in April 2017, look for a second series on Aural Ecologies of noise! **–Guest Editors Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman**

–

During the “grammar wars” of the sixteenth century, when some scholars sought to restrict English letters to an “isomorphic” (or phonemic) relationship between sound and spelling, Richard Mulcaster emerged as a champion of a more broad and complex vernacular orthography in his 1582 [Elementarie](#), with profound implications for the growing English language. In particular, Mulcaster’s insight that language is shaped by “custom” bolsters the argument for variety over phonemic standardization; as he writes (in the 1925 Oxford University Press reprint):

letters ca[n] expresse sou[n]ds withall their ioynts & properties, no fuller than the pencill can the form and lineaments of the face, whose praise is not life but likeness: as the letters yeld not alwaie the same, which sound exactlie requireth, but allwaie the nearest, wherwith custom is content (99).

Mulcaster seems to strongly indicate here that we should *not* expect vernacular orthography to capture sound in any reliable way. Custom – meaning actual usage, etymological roots, and so on, muddies the waters of spelling-based sound. Anyone familiar with Modern English, given its complex conventions and silent, or variably pronounced letters, might agree. Yet as John Wesley notes in [“Mulcaster’s Tyrant Sound,”](#) “Mulcaster’s orthography continually oscillates ... between a conception of letters as completely divorced from sound, and one that finds sound and sight interacting (not always in conflict)” (349).

Indeed, looking more closely at Mulcaster’s statement, it is possible to discern the specter of a scribe, pencil in hand, attempting to capture the “joints and properties” of a poet’s sound in

letters – using different letters depending on the dialectal orthography of the compositional time and space: a listening body making a visual representation of sound.

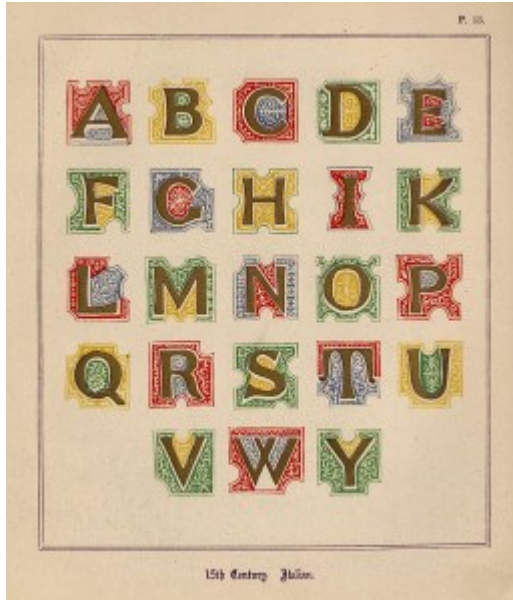


Image of a scribe by Nathan Adams @Flickr CC BY-NC-ND

Certainly, we encounter instances of orthographical representations of distinctive sounds in more recent and deliberate dialect poetry. John Hyland, writing on sound and African diasporic poetry in his unpublished dissertation [Atlantic Reverberations](#), notes of late nineteenth- / early twentieth-century black dialect poems that “in a certain way, they are meant to be read and heard as talking machines. The sound technology, in this case, is the poem; it is a construction and a recording of a ‘black’ voice that socially and culturally functions in a manner analogous to the gramophone” (31). [Ed. Note: you can also read his work on *Sounding Out!* [here](#)]. Following this, it is interesting to try to figure out how the text of a poem can gesture toward and suggest a “sound” that belongs to a localized (even stereotyped) body, despite the text’s being mute on the page. New computational linguistic programs can help play back these ancient sound files, but based on my experience in using them with Middle English texts, there is a ways to go in matching their analytic capabilities with idiosyncratic early English spelling to produce satisfying results.

While late medieval English poems cannot be thought of as deliberate “constructions” of a voice in quite the same way as some contemporary forms of black poetry—although portions of Chaucer’s *The Reeve’s Tale*, in which “northern speech” is represented through alternate spellings and diction, might be an exception—I propose that we imagine orthography (and by extension, the scribes who implemented it) as a kind of “sound technology” analogous to early sound reproduction devices such as the phonograph. The analogy will break down at certain points, but

in suggesting it I hope to answer two related questions: First, to what extent can orthography reliably encode sound (or, to put it another way, offer a score for “decoding” sound)? Second, can we extend back in time the critique of sound technology made by recent “sound theorists,” who tend to focus on texts and technologies from the modern period – and, if so, what can be gained thereby?



A medieval alphabet. Image by Cesar Ojeda @Flickr CC BY-NC-ND

The answer to the first question is, I believe, a very qualified “yes.” Yes, English orthography can and does encode sound, but like so many things about the English language and its highly idiosyncratic spelling conventions, it’s complicated. The second question leads to an elusive, but promising, framework in which to consider the role of orthography in shaping English poetic sound. In short, I will argue that orthographic profiles act as a sort of “performance” in which spelling collaborates with the sound of language to offer a socio-linguistic context within which to experience a given poem.s

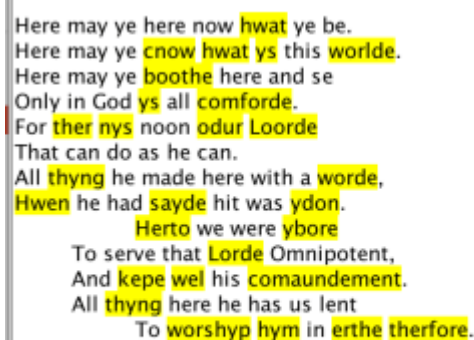
I used [SPARSAR](#), “an expressive poetry reader” developed by computational linguists Rodolfo Delmonte and Anton Maria Prati, to produce audio recordings of three poetic specimens from Middle English: The specimens are: [Osbern Bokenham’s “Life of St. Anne,”](#) (ll. 41-64); [Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Franklin’s Prologue*,](#) (V.709-28); and [John Audelay’s “Conclusion,”](#) (ll.1-13). The specimens were chosen with the idea of dialectal variety in mind: Bokenham is associated with Suffolk, Chaucer with London, and Audelay with the West Midlands. According [to its creators](#), SPARSAR uses “prosodic durational parameters” for English syllables developed by the authors with the aim of “evaluat[ing] objective presumed syllable and feet prosodic distribution at line level,” producing a version of a poem that can be read by Text to Speech (TTS) software with “an appropriate expressivity” (73).

The problem with TTS software is that it produces monotone outputs that fail to account for prosody, let alone expressivity. SPARSAR, I hoped, would “level the playing field” between differing orthographies in the poems, from an analytic standpoint: “the poem is translated into a phonetic form preserving its visual structure and its subdivision into lines and stanzas. Phonetically translated words are associated to mean duration values taking into account position in the word and stress” (Delmonte and Prati 74). Yet textual analysis of poems in Middle English is challenging precisely because of orthographical variation, and this holds true for SPARSAR as well. Before SPARSAR could recognize the speech of the poems, I had to run them through a “normalizing” program—**VARD**, although **Morphadorner** offers a similar service—thus in some ways defeating the purpose of testing orthography’s ability to encode sound, as well as muddling SPARSAR’s fine-grained prosodic analysis.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/audelaypars-1.m4a>

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/audelayraw.m4a>

Audelay first with and then without SPARSER.



//Audelay//

Audelay for VARD. Image used with permission by the author.

Thus, for example, in the second line of my selection from John Audelay, “Here may ye cnow hwat ys this worlde,” I replaced “cnow” with the modern “know” (thus losing the /k/ sound), “hwat” with “what,” “ys” with “is,” and “worlde” with “world.” One easily discerns the loss of information with respect to not only sound, but also scansion (the inflectional “e” ending). SPARSAR also does not account for the [Great Vowel Shift](#) in reproducing Middle English pronunciations. For how this would change the pronunciation of some words, see Simon Horobin, [Does Spelling Matter?](#) (2013).

The recordings produced by the resulting SPARSAR files are, then, a record of failure with respect to my project. But they are instructive failures, nonetheless, and I include them here alongside the “raw” TTS recordings of the poems to illustrate my point: orthography is a key way of encoding sound, yielding both geographic and temporal sonic data. Moreover, such failures – and they are inevitable to a certain extent in any digital analysis of pre-modern English – point out the urgent

need to work ever backwards and include ever more variant spellings in software databases. I am reminded of the comical difficulties that iPhone’s Siri software has in deciphering Scots English, though in that scenario the trouble is not necessarily with orthography, but accent.

<https://youtu.be/1EVnK-pNxAA>

Imagine, however, Siri attempting to decipher an accurately voiced reading of a Robert Burns poem based on its textual appearance.

Echoing Mulcaster’s statement on orthography, Ralph H. Emerson writes in “[English Spelling and Its Relation to Sound](#)” that “alphabetic spelling ... [can] be a kind of backbone that supports the flesh and muscle of all the phonetic and phonemic variants in different dialects and idiolects” (260). The problem, as Mulcaster would point out, is the matter of those phonemic variants, a point Emerson concedes: “Western orthography ... is largely a tale of how people have squeezed as many values as possible out of the very short Roman alphabet” (262). As Simon Horobin writes, the phoneme /r/ is pronounced differently in England even among different speakers of Northern dialect; the various realizations of /r/ that do not alter meaning require the designation of an “allophone”: [r] (21). In order to encode all the various pronunciations, we would need further phonemic symbols. At the risk of oversimplifying several hundred years of the development of spelling conventions in English, the desire for a less arbitrary connection between letter and sound is at the heart of the debates and attempted reforms in which grammarians like Mulcaster were involved.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/audelayspars-11.m4a>

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/bokenraw.m4a>

Bokenham first with and then without SPARSER.

For treuly I make a protestacyon
To Seynt Anne and to hyr dowter Marye,
That yf eythyr errour in myn opynyon
Geyn good maners or heresy
Ageyn the feyth I cowde aspye,
Wythe alle diligence and besynesse
Alle my wyttes I wolde applye
It to reforme and to redresse.

But ere than I ferther forthe procede
In this matere, I lowly beseche
Alle that schul thys story rede
That they loke after no coryous speche,
For Tullyus wolde me never non teche,
Ner in Parnase wher Apollo doth dwelle
I never slepte, ne never dede seche
In Ethna flowrs, wher, as Claudian dothe telle,
Proserpina was rapt; nor of the sugird welle
In Elicona, my rudnesse to leche,
I never dede taste, to me so felle
Wher ever the Muses; and the cruel wreche
Orpheus, whiche hys wyf dede seche
In Helle, of me wolde never take hede
Nor of his armonye oo poynt me teche
In musical proporcyon rymes to lede.

//Bokenham//

Bokenham for VARD. Image used with permission by the author.

Yet as much as Mulcaster argues for an orthography freed from “tyrant sound,” as Wesley notes, his arguments keep circling back to sound’s importance. Wesley writes, “Despite his claims regarding the ‘heard’ Z and its subjugation to the ‘sene’ S, the sound of Z creates a variety of problems for Mulcaster; in fact, its sound means Mulcaster must adjust the appearance and frequency of various other letters” (348). The reason for this is the complex set of rules in English regarding how letters interact with and influence each other in shaping the sound of a word. A more systematic analysis of these rules is precisely what allows Emerson to argue that orthography *can*, in fact, encode sound in English. He writes, “almost any dialect can be described as a plausible and usually predictable realization of the spelling, one word at a time” (265). Emerson describes a “four-step process” for this spelling-based description, which begins with “segment[ing] the spelling into elemental graphemes”; then “assign[ing] the segments their proper graphophonemes, that is, their abstract but systematically universal protovalues.” The next step “shows how the graphophonemes are phonemically realized in particular circumstances within individual dialects.” The example Emerson gives is “hair,” which segments into “H + AI + R, or // her//” (265). From this, he argues, we can reliably derive all the variant pronunciations of “hair.” To complete the process, a litereme is needed; e.g., the litereme <→ matches the phoneme //s// but also provides the “natural characteristic spelling” that expresses the “s” and “soft c” in English (266). Emerson concludes,

To describe how spelling encodes sound in a particular language is simply to chart the relationships between segments on these different levels ... the litereme is the key: THAT is what everything else is really standing for, spellings and sounds and graphophonemes alike. (The letters themselves can be thought of as archiliteremes, with <→ having the reflexes <→ and <→,↔ having <←ā> and <←ǣ>, etc.) ... The simple universal phonology of written English gives birth to the infinite particularities of spoken English. (267)

Fortunately – for the purposes of looking at orthographically expressed Middle English variants, “present orthography still represents the pronunciation of Middle English” (Emerson 267). Unfortunately, though the letter-to-sound relationship in Middle English is much closer, we cannot be sure what those pronunciations were. But we can guess, and orthography is our best (perhaps only) clue.



From letters to sounds. Image by Michael Summers @Flickr CC BY-NC-ND.

The notion of “suggested” pronunciation is indeed where sound studies offers a compelling model for considering the relationship between poem and scribe, and how the former is recorded orthographically by the latter. Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* proposes to construct a “history of sound” that troubles the notion of “face to face” communication as being more “authentic” than sound reproduction technologies, adding, “This history of sound begins by positing sound, hearing, and listening as historical problems rather than as constants on which to build a history” (22). As medievalists know all too well, scribes and scribal variation in the copying of texts constitute a rich field of study when it comes to the question of textual “authenticity.”

Intriguing in light of such variation is Sterne’s idea of “transducers, which turn sound into something else and that something else back into sound” (22) – for which we might read orthography as a kind of technology with “moving parts” that work in concert to reproduce sound, as outlined above. More intriguing, perhaps, is Sterne’s description of the development of “audile technique,” a “practice of listening” that he bases on a study of “virtuosic and highly technical listening skills” during the nineteenth century and the advent of the telegraph, phonograph, and telephone. Sterne writes that with audile technique:

listening became more directional and directed, more oriented toward constructs of private space and private property. The construct of acoustic space as private space in turn made it possible for sound to become a commodity. Audile technique did not occur in the collective, communal space of oral discourse and tradition (if such a space ever existed); it happened in a highly segmented, isolated, individuated acoustic space (24).

In this context, Chaucer’s famous admonition to his scribe “Adam” becomes all the more charged and suggestive (650 in *The Riverside Chaucer*). We must certainly think of medieval scribes as early

practitioners of “audile technique,” taking advantage of orthography as a tool by which to turn sound into a commodity in the form of manuscripts for various occasions and audiences.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/chaucerspars.m4a>

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/chaucerraw-1.m4a>

Chaucer first with and then without SPARSER.

Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
Of diverse adventures maden layes,
Rymeyd in hir firste Briton tonge,
Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe
Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce;
And oon of hem have I in remembraunce,
Which I shal seyn with good wyl as I kan.
But, sires, by cause I am a burel man,
At my bigynnyng first I yow biseche,
Have me excused of my rude speche.
I lerned nevere rethorik, certeyn;
Thyng that I speke, it moot be bare and pleyne.
I sleep nevere on the Mount of Pernaso,
Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero.
Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede,
But swiche colours as growen in the mede,
Or elles swiche as men dye or peynte.
Colours of rethoryk been to me queynte;
My spirit feeleth noght of swich mateere.
But if yow list, my tale shul ye heere.

//Chaucer//

Chaucer for VARD. Image used with permission by the author.

Rethinking medieval texts in this way leaves us with a collaborative sonic performance in which the particular orthographies of the scribes help to pull an author’s text into a certain sound-space, even if it is inexact and in some sense inauthentic. Our ability to “hear” that space, to share it, is limited by our limited mapping of the incredibly multiform ways that English was uttered, and how those utterances were scored on the page by poets and scribes. Wesley notes the importance of discipline to Mulcaster’s educational-grammatical program as set forth in the *Elementarie*; discipline also hovers over the listening bodies performing audile technique for the sake of increasingly commodified sound spaces described by Sterne. English letters resist such discipline, sliding around various orthographies depending on time, place, poet, and scribe. In order to begin to use programs like SPARSAR to recreate, however tentatively, the sound they encode, we must loosen the standardizing discipline of our technology in parsing letters of the past.

Featured image “Mixed Media Painting” by See-ming Lee @Flickr CC BY-SA

David Hadbawnik is a poet, translator, and medieval scholar. His *Aeneid Books 1-6* were published by Shearsman Books in 2015. He is the editor and publisher of *Habenicht Press* and the journal *kadar koli*, a co-editor of *eth press*, which focuses on creative interactions with medieval texts, and associate director of *punctum books*. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of English at the American University of Kuwait.



REWIND! . . . If you liked this post, you may also dig:

[The Hysterical Alphabet](#)—John Corbett, Terri Kapsalis, and Danny Thompson

[The Eldrich Voice: H.P. Lovecraft’s Weird Phonography](#)—James A. Steintrager

[Mouthing the Passion: Richard Rolle’s Soundscapes](#)—Christopher Roman