

St Erkenwald: The Spectacle of Noise

bonniesmillar

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Listening, Literature, Medieval Sounds, Noise, Poetry/Poets



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Dorothy Kim and
Christopher Roman

Here is a distilled introduction to the latest installment of *Medieval Sound*, *Aural Ecology*, by series co-editors Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman. To read their previous introduction, click [here](#). To read the first run of the series in 2016, click [here](#). To read the full introduction to “Aural Ecology” and to read last week’s post by Thomas Blake, click [here](#).

Aural Ecology

What is considered music, noise, or harmony is historically and culturally contingent. [. . .] The essays in “Aural Ecologies” address the issue of unharmonious sounds, sounds that often mark dissonant critical identities—related to race, religion, material—that reverberate across different soundscapes/landscapes. In this way, this group of essays begins to open up the stakes of *Medieval Sound* in relation to what contemporary sound studies has begun to address in relation to cultural studies, architectural and environmental soundscapes, and the marking of race through the vibrations of the body. —**Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman**

We don’t always listen to medieval poetry in the same way that we listen to contemporary verse, despite its many sonic features. This article addresses the central role of sound in a Middle English alliterative poem, *St Erkenwald*, which recounts a *meruayle* (158) that takes place in St Paul’s cathedral. Through listening to the aural texture of the poem, to the voices in the text listeners/ readers can interact with events as they unfurl.

Indeed John Scattergood has been argued that this work is a “conversation poem, a poem of transformations” (181), wherein things, legends are re-invented. Its central concerns are with the nature of salvation and history, how the past confronts the present and is obscured through the mists of time, with lay folk requiring the mediation of the clergy in order to comprehend its significance. The pagan judge’s discourse can be seen as representing living history, revealing what artifacts, writing, documents cannot. The poem’s highlighting of the limitations of memory, written records and commemoration, creates an enigma as P. Vance Smith phrases it, with the dead body left to recount its own place in the scheme of events (59-60, 74). It is through dialogue and sound, the poem’s sonorous fabric that the events are finally resolved, and their potential meaning extracted.

St Erkenwald opens with an account of the physical, historical and religious setting of the tale, which evolves into a description of the re-building of the cathedral. The *mery* (39) stone masons, whilst engaged in their work, uncover a splendid tomb, lavishly decorated. The description of the digging and carving of stone conveys jarring, bustling activity. News of the tomb with its indecipherable text spreads rapidly (58-62).

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/file-1-remix.mp3>

Voice File: lines 58-100

[Click here to view transcript of Lines 58-100](#)



Etching of Old St. Paul's Cathedral, London, from Francis Bond's Early Christian Architecture, 1913.

Apart from the explicit references to noise, the verbs are evocative of clamour and urgency. Far from proceeding calmly and in an orderly fashion to the tomb, the people *highid*, *boghit*, *lepen* and *ronnen*. A powerful sense of speed and movement is evoked, heightened by the numbers of people involved. Something extremely unusual has happened and everyone desires to see it. The event develops into a spectacle of noise, a lively social occasion, as layers of details and elements are accumulated.

Noise does not signify in itself, it has meaning only in relation to other modes of signification. Michelle R. Warren, in her analysis of “The Noise of Roland”, argues that from the “combined perspectives of acoustics, information theory, and philology” it is possible to view noise and signals or messages as interdependent and that what distinguishes something as meaningful, a signal or message, or disruptive, is “intent” (283). This is particularly evident in literature, which can be viewed as the “noise of culture,” a disturbance in the dissemination of information and thus literary texts can be viewed as “various forms of mixed signals” (304). Sound, like time and

space helps to delineate boundaries between the self and other and in order for identity to be established the noisy other must be silenced.

However, there is no hint of violence, unease or alterity in all of this haste in the cathedral to see the wonder with which the pilgrims have been presented. The opening of the tomb is carefully and courteously organized by the mayor and the sacristan and skillfully enacted by the workmen. The body unearthed is as fresh as he is “sounde sodanly were slippid opon slepe”(92). There is a child-like innocence, an enthusiasm for the marvelous, the new. Even the mayor, civic and religious leaders are anxious to investigate the find. Each person questions what lies before him and endeavours to make sense of it.

To this end, they search for records and memories of this seemingly important individual (96-100). The discussion works from the materiality of the body outwards in an attempt to unravel the underlying meaning. This referral to documentation to find a rationale for what is happening proves ineffectual. The questioning of texts and modes of recording draws in the receivers of *St. Erkenwald*, who possess a similar level of knowledge of the events, witnessing them unfurl, just as the folk in the poem, uniting both the internal and external audiences.



Erkenwald teaching monks in a historiated initial from the Chertsey Breviary (c.1300)

News reaches Bishop Erkenwald of these happenings whilst he is visiting an abbey in Essex, and losing no time, he *buskyd þiderwarde bytyme* (112). Erkenwald spends the night reciting his canonical hours, beseeching God's help to solve the mystery in order to confirm the people's faith. His prayers prefigure the closure of the poem, functioning as an expression of desire, which through supplication is fulfilled leading to celebration as his wish and the wishes of the people are fulfilled in that the mystery of the body and divine workings are revealed.

Once he assumes control of proceedings all clamour and commotion cease, at his behest (131-2).

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/file-2-remix.mp3>

Voice File 2 lines 131-145

<https://doi.org/10.59350/4qxzc-s9190>

[Click here to read a transcript of lines 131-145](#)

The exquisite notes of the choir are an instance of that important element of medieval cultures, music, with every aspect of medieval life and experience and embodiment being musically significant. Lords gather, not rush to *herken* (134) the beautiful, intricate singing. After this carefully designed performance of sound in honour of God, the bishop processes to the tomb location. We learn of all the great, good and ordinary souls who follow the bishop as the area is unlocked with a great bundle of keys. The keys probably jangle in the echoing confines of the cloister, a naturalistic detail that draws the listener/ reader into the scene. Having negotiated the cloister the focus then narrows to a moving conversation between the bishop and the corpse. All is silence now (218-20).

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/file-3-remix.mp3>

Voice File 3 lines 193-220

[Click here to read a transcript of lines 193-220](#)

The crowd is as large as before, with a crush forming behind the bishop as he passes through it, yet it is becalmed through sheer amazement. The contrast between the calmness and silence of the crowd now and its previous frenetic noisy activity is quite arresting. Boisterous garrulous behavior evident amongst those attending religious worship is widely attested and, as Diana Wood notes, the church court records contain references to louts disrupting worship and bear testament to widespread chattering with warnings issued upon occasion (207).



University of Leicester Special Collections. The Shrine of Saint Erkenwald, which was in the shape of a pyramid, with an offering-table before it, and was adorned with gold, silver and

*precious stones. From SCT 00908,
William Dugdale, The History of
St. Pauls Cathedral in London :
From its Foundation Untill these
Times ..., (London, 1818)*

The dean recounts to Erkenwald all their attempts to unearth the identity of the body (159-62). Erkenwald responds by counselling the need to draw inspiration from God and to trust in their faith and to emphasize that only with divine aid can miracles be comprehended. Thereafter follows a dialogue between the bishop and the body in which we learn of the circumstances of the latter's life and death. We are presented with performance history, the dead speaking to the living, to us, rather than information having to be gleaned from dusty monuments, texts and documents. These living words reveal God's plan and their underlying significances are mediated by Erkenwald for the deceased judge and spectators. The poem in turn translates these events for later readers/listeners. The focus remains firmly fixed on the bishop and the corpse, with the crowd quietly observing and listening, in the same manner as those who hear/read the text.

Indeed, throughout this section the references to noise are limited to verbs and phrases which suggest sorrow. The corpse *hummyd* (281) and *gefe a gronyng* (283). One can almost hear the silence as Erkenwald pauses and looks at the tomb with flowing tears. As he *warpyd* the words of baptism *wete* (321) drips from his eyes and *trillyd adoun* (322). A drop falls on the judge's face, facilitating his having a vision of paradise. His *sadde soun* (324) sounds out in that place for the last time for a final time as he describes what he sees and "wyt this cessyd his sowne, sayd he no more" (341). The judge is miraculously received into heaven and his body instantaneously decomposes, in the midst of great tranquility.

The climax of the poem is a crescendo of sound, as the crowd rejoices at the happy fate of the judge, but it is a happiness inevitably tinged with sadness in the face of death (350-2).

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/file-4-lines-309-52.mp3>

Voice File 4 lines 309-352

[Click here to read a transcript of lines 309-352](#)



A sermon at Paul's Cross
(from the *Society of Antiquaries of London*)

All are involved in the procession with bells ringing out throughout the town. The bells call not only the folk of Erkenwald's London to participate in this joyful spectacle; they invite later audiences to join the celebration. Thus childlike innocence and enthusiasm combined with the direction of the church in tangible situations are deemed beneficial. This is paralleled in the positivity of silence and the three correct usages of human speech as explicated in a fifteenth-century sermon by an Oxford student monk on the gospel reading for the third Sunday in Lent, Luke II:14-28. An individual, especially a cleric, must be silent and meditate before he can graciously address the Lord. Quiet study is necessary prior to exhorting people to leave their sinful ways, with the final purpose of rightful speech being confession, which should only be exercised after the silent acquiring of wisdom (41-51).

The poem's narrative voice adds that physicality is merely vainglorious, and what is fundamental is the soul's achieving of bliss through the expression of love for Our Lord who makes this feasible. Such explicit comments are comparatively rare in *St. Erkenwald* with the role of the church and lay folk, and their obligations performed, expressed, rather than stated. The poem provides a model of the religious culture of a cathedral with the roles of clergy and laity carefully delineated. Through a spectacle of sound, ordered and disordered, of human and divine orchestration, pastoral care and guidance is enacted for the audience in and of the poem.

Featured Image: Image from the *Crusader Bible*, Morgan Library M.638, fol. 3r.

Bonnie Millar, Ph.D., *Researcher at the University of Nottingham holds degrees from Trinity College Dublin, and the University of Nottingham. She has authored a critical study of the Siege of Jerusalem, and also publishes regularly on alliterative poetry, medieval romances, gender theory and myths. Publications include a paper entitled “Hero or Jester: Gawain in Middle English Romances and Ballads” in Le Personnage de Gauvain dans la littérature européenne du Moyen Âge ed. Marie-Françoise Alamichel, a chapter on “Key Critics, Concepts & Topics” in the Continuum Handbook of Medieval British Literature, “A Measure of Courtliness: Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle” in Cultures Courtoises en Mouvement: Proceedings of the Thirteenth Congress of the International Society of Courtly Literature and contributions to the Facts on File Companion to Pre-1600 British Poetry. Current projects include a full length study of the figure of Gawain entitled Gawain: From Hero to Anti-Hero in late Middle English and Early Modern Romances and Ballads.*



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