

CHAUCER'S DECIBELS

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The decibel is a numerical expression of the relative loudness of a sound. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, the difference in decibels of two sounds is ten times the common logarithm of the ratio of their power levels. Fortunately for the point to be made in this discussion, Chaucer never heard of a decibel; equally fortunately for literary considerations, the term *decibel* has entered the general vocabulary as an expression meaning "noise level." The analysis which follows will be about exactly that: the noise levels in Chaucer's poetry, noise being part of the human condition about which he wrote so memorably.

One sees the famous miniatures of the Ellesmere Manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* with awe and reverence for the artist of graceful horses and riders true to Chaucer's descriptions. They are captured in their fictitious moment of time — even though scholars know that the horses were traced — notable for embroidery, wimples, saddles, spurs, bells, and physiognomy.¹ Alike, pictures and poetry assume a certain amount of cacophony that went with real life, both in such hostels as the Tabard Inn in Southwark and on the road to Canterbury. Horses' hoofs, bridle-bells, barking dogs, loud voices, and even a set of bagpipes accompanied this famous assembly along the road. Their hostels, of which Harry Bailly's establishment is the most

famous, received "Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye" (I.24)² with considerable hubbub and din: voices, hoofs on cobblestones, running about of servants, dismounting and unloading — all to the clatter of kitchen and scullery noises. These matters pertain to the "General Prologue" and the links as the framing technique for Chaucer's collection of short stories. The stories themselves have noise levels which are part of their poet's milieu: towns, wars, oceans, barnyards, forges, manure-carts, gristmills, and so on.

Discussion of Chaucer's noise-levels requires some prefatory comments of another sort, regarding the oral-aural situation for which this poetry was written and the situation in which it is now read. For it is widely believed that Chaucer's poetry was written to be read aloud, though the generalization is more interesting than provable. Even with such a caveat, Chaucer has set up at least his *Canterbury Tales* in an intricate oral-aural scheme with his persona presenting a frame-construct in which a variety of narrators do the tale-telling. The frame-story, with its own noises, contains the voices of narrators, the voices themselves being noise. Through this vocal noise the pilgrim-audience hears and also delivers individually the *Canterbury Tales*, the tales themselves having their own kinds of noise. To this complication must be added the fact that, read now in Middle English, Chaucer's oral-aural situation has to be learned anew by undoing the Great Vowel Shift of the fifteenth century and by pronouncing the unstressed final *e* in many constructions, especially at the ends of lines. In short, Chaucer's verse is approached by teaching people to read it aloud. Nevertheless, a genius such as Chaucer can manipulate credibility even through layers of voices: the persona's, the narrators', and our own attempts to get his works read correctly.

In dealing with Chaucer's sounds, we are of course involved with a society ancestral to our own which can no longer be experienced directly. A day in the country may be as close as it is possible to get to the world as Chaucer knew it, provided, of course, that cars and combines are out of earshot, that utility poles are hidden by trees, that no airplanes pass overhead, and that domestic activity involves neither food-processors nor ringing telephones. The sounds of nature live on: bird-song, wind in grass and trees, voices of sheep and cattle, barking of dogs. Both the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and the tale of the Pardoner concern rural life, its low-level sounds stirred up with the shouting and shrieking of the chase that follows Chauntecleer's misadventure, and the death-agonies of the Pardoner's roisterers as they do each other in beneath the tree where they have sought and found death personified.

The Nun's Priest and the Pardoner come to attention initially not as tellers of rural tales but as part of an urban scene as their pilgrimage assembles at the Tabard Inn in Southwark. The Tabard was no Holiday Inn. There must have been noise of many horses and of their owners' suppliers — blacksmiths, saddlers, provisioners, grooms, hucksters, beggars, and purveyors of personal services, not to mention dogs. Inns were built around courtyards. Whatever the actual figure Chaucer meant to convey by "Wel nyne and twenty," that number of horses riding into a flagged yard far outdid a fleet of automobiles in generating noise, though a fleet of motorcycles might have overwhelmed Harry Bailly. The guests, once inside their inn, found rush-strewn floors and common (though not unisex) sleeping accommodations. Rushes probably had acoustical properties, and buildings of the time certainly had thicker walls than modern buildings, built of stone, brick, or plaster and timber, if not some of each. Even so, outside racket inevitably combined with kitchen-scuttery clatter into noise levels no longer acceptable unless one is housed over a night-club, cheaply.

Kitchen noises of such a place are interesting to contemplate in the absence of automation or indeed of serfdom, no longer extant in Chaucer's England. The principal noises of the kitchen, besides voices of every tone, would have been those of bellows, fires crackling, spits turning, cauldrons bubbling, steam hissing, and the general thudding of knives, mallets, kneading, grating, and sieving, the latter done more than at present as the normal way to deal with the mediaeval egg. To these should be added scraping, probably by wooden spoons, and knocking of pots made of copper and iron. Since refrigeration was unknown, chickens may have clucked their last in the kitchen.

The scullery was a place of clean-up, though guests brought their own eating equipment and napery, cleansed at the table. Scullery noise was that of pots and platters scraped and sluiced to a general cacophony of shouting, laughing, howling, and oath-making. Perhaps guests were used to commotion, but there is no disguising the fact that a mediaeval inn was a noisy place. It is interesting, however, that Chaucer takes all this for granted, describing nothing of congenial snoring or other physical attributes of being "esed atte beste" (I.29), though such noise was called to the imagination by the mere mention of an inn.

Noise in the rest of the "General Prologue" works in much the same way, as Chaucer assumes, rather than details, the Knight's wars, the Prioress's sentimental tears, and the Shipman's survived tempests. The most prevalent noise is, of course, that of voices. Otherwise, what stands out is

musical sound. Chaucer says of the Squire, "Syngyng he was, or floytyng, al the day" (I.91); he remarks upon the Monk's bridle-bells, "Gynglen in a whistlyng wynd als cleere / And eek as loude as dooth the chapel belle" (I.170-71); he says that the Friar has "a murye note / Wel koude he syng and pleyen on a rote" (I.235-36); he remarks that the Pardoner and Summoner sing a duet, "'Com hider, love, to me!'" (I.672-73) and that the Pardoner is also good at singing an offertory, although he does not show that individual in the act of doing so. The Miller appears to be the noisiest pilgrim, since Chaucer says that he can break down a door with his head, though the splintering exists only in the imagination; again, there is no description, and the Miller's ability to do so is not demonstrated. What he actually does perform is music upon the bagpipes, with which he leads the pilgrimage out of town. In summary, the "General Prologue" stirs up sound by the power of suggestion. Rarely does Chaucer give details.

After the "General Prologue," the next action in *The Canterbury Tales* is the Knight's tale of two knights, Palamon and Arcite, left for dead in the Theban War by edict of the cruel Creon, and his account of their rescue and imprisonment by Theseus, Duke of Athens, on his way home after conquering the Amazon Hippolyta, whom he has wedded and who is accompanied by her sister, the virginal Emelye. Later on, when the two prisoners, having fallen in love with Emelye and eventually escaped from their prison-tower, meet in a grove and arrange to fight a mortal combat over the girl, we know that they are about to hack each other to death. Chaucer has little to say except that the lion has met the tiger, and, doubling the metaphor, that they fight as wild boars fight, frothing for ire. At this point, the narrator — supposedly the Knight, but of course the presiding genius is Chaucer — breaks in with a favourite device, *occupatio*: the necessity of doing something else. This leaves them standing in their own blood as the Knight (Chaucer) tells how Theseus has gone Maying with his family, accidentally coming upon the foes, their swords going as if to fell an oak (I.1702), at which point he intervenes. The imagery is far more visual than aural, the noise-level being only that of chopping down an oak, albeit the stoutest of trees. The visual imagery and the meagre description turn on plenty of noise in the imagination. Chaucer has saved the real noise for the lists Theseus decrees for the true combat. Here there is much commotion, as armorers with files get people into their battle gear.

The opponents, moreover, come with musical instruments. Their sound is less like the grapes of wrath than it is like squires having a wonderful time with pipes, drums, nakers, and clarions. These are war-games fought

for the hand of a princess. Kingdoms are not at stake, although the planets have taken sides. Indeed, it is music that awakens Theseus on the fateful morning. He issues stern rules: only spears are allowed in the lists, thus eliminating the noisiest and bloodiest kinds of combat. But riding at speed with clarions blowing and breaking spears upon shields cannot be other than Chaucer's maximum use of sound, Chaucer at his loudest, though he is still not giving his audience the sounds of war as he must have known them himself in France. Oddly enough, this tournament for the hand of Emelye is far noisier than the Trojan War of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Chaucer has no battles at sea, except by allusion, as in his portrait of the Knight in the "General Prologue." But there are glimpses of sea-life in his stories, including the storm-tossed misadventures of the Man of Law's Constance, twice set adrift in a rudderless ship. Through prayer, endurance, virtue, and miracle, this emperor's daughter survives the terrors of the deep and poetic justice prevails in the end. But after five years of this peril, we learn of the sea only that it is salt and that it can be tempestuous. Chaucer, through his Man of Law, does not actually describe the terrifying noise of angry storms at sea; nor does he delineate the peaceful contrast of sound when wind and waves are gentle. Chaucer has assumed the seascape and its noises for an audience insular enough that the sea was never far away. There are other references to the sea in Chaucer's poetry, but its noise is not given in detail. The story of Constance creates the terror of wild seas by using other imagery, which turns on the imagination through allusion.

Chaucer gives more detail to noise produced by people and by creatures than to that resulting from phenomena of nature, as shown in the suggestive rather than overt dealing with Constance in her rudderless ship. He could have made far more of the storm that rages in Book III of *Troilus and Criseyde*, although this is not to say that the lines which are in fact descriptive lack power, as for example, "And evere mo so sterneliche it ron, / And blew therwith so wondirliche loude, / That wel neigh no man heren other koude" (677-79). Chaucer uses this scene to bring Troilus and Criseyde together. He invests in the events that follow, not in the noise of this providential storm.

Noises of musical instruments, people, and creatures — in this case birds, horses, and hounds — are vivid in *The Book of the Duchess*, which, although a dream vision, is one of his poems richest in noise. He awakens (or makes his persona do so) to birds singing loudly on a spring morning. There follow sounds of hunting-horns, of people and horses being readied for the hunt. The dreamer finds himself involved as the hounds are uncoupled

and the hunt streaks into the forest with traditional cries and shouts that cannot have been unfamiliar to a poet who had been a page in an aristocratic household. The poem thus starts with noises *fortissimo*, but as the dreamer becomes separated from the hunt he finds himself deep in a quiet grove where he interviews a man in mourning. This scene possesses serenity. The dreamer has just learned why the man in black is mourning when the hunt crashes back and his dream falls apart as dreams will. The technique here uses violent noise in contrast with near silence. The effect is memorable, even though *The Book of the Duchess* is one of Chaucer's early works.

The chase in a more comic milieu appears in the fable re-told in *The Canterbury Tales* by the Nun's Priest. The poor widow's chicken-coop can hardly be considered in terms of decibels, despite Chauntecleer's prowess at crowing and Pertelote's skill at herbalism and dream-psychology, until the elegant cock falls victim to a wily fox. At this point a chase ensues, with shrieking and other appropriate noises, including noises of livestock in hot pursuit, a caricature of a hunt. The situation is the reverse of the situation of noise in *The Book of the Duchess* as Chaucer, through the pilgrim-narrator, uses the chase as a mad contrast to the formerly peaceful country scene. It is noise used for delight, though the delight is certainly not Chauntecleer's.

Noise used for delight appears also in the best-known of Chaucer's fabliaux, that told by the Miller, already cited as the noisiest of the Canterbury pilgrims. It is common knowledge that the skill in this fabliau lies in the carefully set-up elements of the story and the speed with which they are cut loose into a pile-up of the comic results of practical jokes. The use of noise follows the same technique. In the descriptions with which the story begins, the student's room contains a psaltery, of which Chaucer gives us a still-life. The student's competitor for the love of his landlord's wife sings a serenade under her window, that fixture becoming the frame of ensuing events. The fact that the landlord, a carpenter, has a noisy trade is only implied: he never knocks in a nail during the story. The serenade re-appears in the course of a trick the student has devised so that he can enjoy the carpenter's wife while that poor dupe, her husband, believing that he will escape an impending return of Noah's flood, sleeps in a tub tied to the roof. The would-be troubadour, thwarted by a misdirected kiss, goes to a forge — of all possible places the noisiest, though Chaucer does not trouble with that obvious fact — and secures a hot tool, which produces a yell from the intended perpetrator of a second dirty kiss. That in turn causes the duped carpenter to cut loose his tub in the belief that it will float since the flood has arrived, so, in crashing to the courtyard, he causes a noisy crowd to

gather. Chaucer has progressed from a described musical instrument to soft sound in the form of a serenade, to a forge, to a yell, to a crash and ensuing commotion, this crescendo running exactly parallel to the development of the tale.

This discussion is necessarily incomplete, since all of Chaucer's works cannot be considered here, but it permits some interesting observations. Frequently, if not usually, Chaucer does not describe noise directly but plants it in the imagination by suggestion rather than delineation. He uses *occupatio* and other evasions to avoid describing noise of war and other violence, though jousting is an exception as in the "Knight's Tale." His most descriptive noise-passages involve chases, comic situations, games such as tournaments, and events involving musical instruments. These listings can overlap and do so often. Otherwise, Chaucer centres his poetic attention on the voices of people, people in the vocal act of narration and in the conviviality as well as the sorrows of their living.

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NOTES

¹ Herbert C. Schultz, *The Ellesmere Manuscript of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1966), 3-4.

² All references to Chaucer's works are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., Larry D. Benson, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

