Chaucer Live! How Performance Helps Realize the Many Chaucerian Voices in the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to clarify and elaborate on the theories and presentation of the performance of the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* I gave on April 9th, 2015. Live performance is a valuable method of conveying Chaucer’s work to an audience as it allows an actor to present the many voices of Chaucer in a more liberated manner. I present my case in four sections. First, I discuss the theoretical concepts behind the performance, which includes the value of live performance over silent reading and oral recitation and how the performance should be viewed in an experimental context. I conclude that while oral recitation and silent reading are valuable, neither allows for the freedom to explore Chaucer’s many voices the way live performance does. At the same time, performance cannot replace research and thus performances like ours should be seen as experiments. Second, I discuss the historical context of the performance and how it was forged into a structural foundation. As well, I examine the manner in which the audience was involved. By using the date June 6th, 1389, we were able to create an interactive, visual means for the audience to engage with the voices. Third, I look at Chaucer’s meter, his spelling and the Middle English language in general and how these factors impacted both my rehearsal and final delivery. Ultimately, by committing to the language and Chaucer’s meter as faithfully as possible, I was able to provide a respectful and communicative relationship with the audience. Fourth, I look at three characters (Chaucer the Performer, Knight and Summoner) and how they were performed. I reveal how our performance demonstrates that each character uses many voices, not just one. Finally, I conclude by elaborating on the future of this project and how our performance has been valuable as a teaching tool as well as a means of presenting the work. Chaucer has many voices in the prologue, not just one, and true conveyance of them is most successfully achieved through live performance.
Acknowledgements

I wish to offer my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Professor Peter Robinson for his guidance, insight, mentorship and good spirits throughout this process and beyond. His knowledge made this project possible and his creative spirit matched, and exceeded, my own in preparing this performance for an audience of newcomers to Chaucer, many of whom left fans afterwards thanks to the boundless enthusiasm for Chaucer Professor Robinson brought with him. I would also like to thank Graduate Chair and Professor Allison Muri for her leadership and her openness to unconventional approaches to research and study. As well, I am grateful to Professor Yin Liu for being the second reader and offering her insight and wisdom.

This project would not have been possible without the assistance of many who offered their time and talents out of genuine enthusiasm for the project. These include Department of Drama Head Professor Douglas Thorpe, Costume Designer Beverly Kobelsky, Set Designer Iain Rose and Lighting Designer Torien Cafferata. As well, deep gratitude to Lia Pas for her vocal assistance. Also, my thanks goes to Kyle Dase and Megan Wall for their portrayals of Richard and Anne, with special thanks going to Terry Jones and Barbara Bordalejo. My gratitude also goes to the Centre for Classical, Medieval and Renaissance Study, Comitatus, the Departments of English and Drama, and the College of Arts and Science within the University of Saskatchewan for their support.

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**Introduction**

On April 9th, 2015, I gave a performance of the General Prologue of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* for an audience of both newcomers and experts. For this performance, the audience was not invited to think of themselves as casual Chaucer fans listening to his work recited by a reader hundreds of years later. Rather, they were invited to think of themselves as courtiers viewing a new work being presented for King Richard II that day by the author himself, whose writing was fast becoming the most exciting in England. On June 6th, 1389, such an event might have occurred. Certainly, there is no record of it happening; however, our goal was not to accurately recreate a known moment in time. Our goal was to experiment with the General Prologue and the audience to see if we could bring to life for them the spirit in which Chaucer’s work may have been presented. The performance in question can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMsp8xHkRnA

The *Canterbury Tales* is often performed, usually read directly from the text and sometimes in Modern English. High School and University students are often asked to recite sections of the poem as part of their studies. These performances are not harmful; however, what they have often neglected to include is the author himself. The voices and presence of Chaucer are found in every line, character and bit of humor in the poem; so, as is explained in this paper, leaving Chaucer out robs the work of half its voice. Chaucer intends to engage and form a relationship with his audience. Through the embodiment of both the author’s voice and the many variations thereof found within Chaucer’s many creations a performer can effectively forge this connection and present a more complete and engaging performance of the work.

This paper introduces and describes the theoretical and structural means that went into the performance and why we believe it to be a valuable way of introducing and exploring Chaucer’s work. This is done in four sections that each represent one integral aspect of the performance. The first section explores the theories behind this project including why live performance provides a deeper experience than silent reading and oral recitation, why portraying Chaucer himself is the best way to achieve the proper communication between Chaucer the author and his audience and how the performance operates as an experiment. This first section is the longest and its arguments resonate throughout the rest. The second section looks at the structural features of the performance, including the logic behind setting our performance on June 6th, 1389 as well
as the general presentation of the project along with how the audience was included and why. The third section looks at the meter and the challenges involved in performing in the original language. Other topics include my decisions regarding the final –e and how I chose to deliver various difficult lines. The fourth section will focus on three characters, the narrative voice, the Knight and the Summoner, with occasional references toward the rest. Finally, the conclusion examines the discoveries made, the questions raised and the future of this project. Ultimately, what these sections demonstrate is that the many voices of the poet and the world he lived and wrote in are too integral to the *Canterbury Tales* to be left unutilized. Historically-based live performance is an effective method of presenting the work because it allows the audience to experience the many voices of Chaucer as well as his rich satire and powerful sincerity in ways they cannot when someone merely reads the poem orally.

1. **The Theory Behind the Performance**

   This first section explains the logic and philosophy behind the performance through three crucial ideas. First, I explain the distinction between live performance and the acts of silent reading and oral recitation, which are the most frequent methods of presenting the *Canterbury Tales*, and why silent reading and oral recitation fail to project the many voices of Chaucer to the degree live-performance does. Second, I discuss the logic behind the decision to portray Chaucer the author and the many other Chaucerian voices, instead of just Chaucer the pilgrim. Since one of the most fundamental parts of the *Canterbury Tales* is the striking differences and eccentricities of the numerous characters present in the narrative, our logic was that there should not be one Chaucer in this story but several. These include Chaucer the author, Chaucer the Pilgrim, and the many voices Chaucer brings to the remaining figures. Third, I explore why the performance described here must be viewed as a kind of experiment requiring an artistic eye along with a dedicated and thorough research component, as its relationship to the field of research is both essential and beneficial. Each of these ideas helps clarify how our goal was to provide a means of breaking down the barriers that silent reading and oral recitation face so as to truly allow the audience to experience and engage with the many different Chaucerian voices. These three ideas will be dealt with individually.
1a. Live Performance vs. Silent Reading and Oral Recitation

My performance acted upon what Oliver describes as “the logic of how the Real Author’s consciousness splits into the characters he creates on the one hand, and on the other into an ‘I’ that does the narration” (133). As an actor physically interacting with an audience, I was better able to convey this “split” than if I had been reading or reciting orally, because I acted as a neutral party and was therefore able to better depict and differentiate between the many different voices Chaucer presents. In short, I engaged the audience as the author rather than as myself. In silent reading this interaction is not as effective because the voices are given no distinction and therefore shifts in tone, as well as voice, are hard to catch. As well, in silent reading the Narrator and the author have the same voice so communication becomes less diverse and can be confusing. Engagement between reader and author still occurs but is lessened due to the lack of distinction in the voices.

While oral recitation is better, there is still an issue with communication. Essentially, oral recitation allows for better engagement than silent reading (since we hear the rhythm of Chaucer’s words) but without the historical context and mystique of full performance, the engagement is not as strong. Further, while oral recitation can allow for more of a distinction between the voices of the characters than silent reading, without the physicality and more neutral presence of an actor the distinction is still lessened due to the reader acting as themselves rather than the poet. By presenting an independent third party, the actor, as a means of presenting the many voices in a clear, visual and oral style the distinctions reach their full effect. Paul Strohm

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1 Performance theory has a rich scholarly tradition and I have made extensive use of it. The writing of Linda Marie Zaerr, mainly her book *Performance and the Middle English Romance*, was particularly useful in helping me understand how to formulate my ideas in an interdisciplinary way, given that this was to be an English paper, not a drama paper. Similarly, Kate Normington’s book *Medieval English Drama*, where she says performance is “an act which has been self-consciously prepared for deliberate spectatorship” (2), was useful. As well, Sharon Aronson-Lehavi’s brilliant *Street Scenes: Late Medieval Acting and Performance* evokes Brecht’s concept of theatricality as an “aesthetic concept that highlights the process of enactment and its ‘liveness.’” (1) also proved useful in formulating my own ideas. I also utilized the writing of Douglas Oliver and his book *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* to bring the concepts of performance outside of the theatrical and focus on poetics. As well, *Chaucerian Theatricality* by John M. Ganim and C. David Benson’s *Chaucer’s Drama of Style* were valuable. Other works utilized but not cited include Elina Gertsman, ed. *Visualizing Medieval Performance*. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008).

2 This does not mean I was able to physically represent Chaucer the man. I was merely able to present a representation of the figure of Chaucer the poet. I don’t, and can’t, know what Chaucer was thinking when he performed, or ever. I merely wished to provide a representation of the author for the audience to engage with, which was enough.
has stated, “I agree with those who believe that a written or spoken communication is held in common by its writer or speaker and its audience. Sitting at one end of what might be thought a communicative bridge or chain, the audience has a tacit but constant influence on the form of the final work” (196) and he is correct. However, as our performance shows, a third party, the actor, is needed to make this exchange between author and audience more potent.

Much evidence exists for Chaucer reading his work aloud, if not any to indicate that our representation was completely accurate. The General Prologue is filled with references to a present, listening audience and a present moment. For example, he constantly refers to the reader as having “heard” what he said, “As ye han herd what nedeth wordes mo?” (line 851). In fact, a survey done by Joyce Colemen of Chaucer’s works “reveals forty-four passages in which Chaucer, speaking directly to his audience, assumes they will ‘hear,’ ‘harken,’ or in one case ‘listen’” (149). The line “But nathelesse while I have tyme and space” (line 35) suggests not only that Chaucer is with an audience, but that he has time available to speak to them. Of course, there are also plenty of references in Chaucer’s work to the act of reading. In particular, there is the line in the Miller’s Prologue, “Turne ouer the leef and che se another tale” (line 3171) which, unless Chaucer is speaking figuratively, would suggest he is addressing a reader, not a listener. And yet before that Chaucer states, “Me athynkenth that I shal reherce it here,” (line 3164) where “here” again seems to place the audience in the room with him. What these contradictory references show is that Chaucer seemed aware of both the performative and literary elements of his writing. These quotes seem to suggest that while Chaucer did indeed perform live, he also knew that they would be preserved n manuscript and thus would have silent readers. Clearly, literature was very much of interest to Chaucer as the references to reading and books in the Man-of-Law and Clerk portraits show. I concur with Coleman’s argument on the Canterbury Tales as a work of aurality, “although writing for performance, the author had time to compose the text at his own pace and alone, knowing that it would be preserved in written form and that this written form would visibly dominate the group experience” (28). Our performance is not an attempt to disregard silent reading but to reintroduce Chaucer’s work to a listening audience.

Some could argue, and have, that given the limitations of our understanding of medieval performances and what little evidence there is for how Chaucer actually presented his work that live performance is an unnecessary and perhaps detrimental idea. One such critic, Edward E.
Foster, even dismissed the notion of Chaucer being read aloud since “there is no direct evidence that Chaucer, or anyone else, ever read the Tales or segments of them aloud at court or at any other venue. The evidence for oral presentation is not conclusive.” (406) In addition, Michael Murphy certainly felt this way, as he expresses in his essay *On Not Reading Chaucer – Aloud*. Murphy views the attempt to present the work in its original language as “not especially harmful, but of little real use” (207). He is not without a few relevant and important points, chiefly his questioning of the way students are expected to experience and read Chaucer’s work in its complicated original language without much preparation or understanding of how different it is from modern English. This performance was largely intended to address that issue and hopefully will find use in classrooms.

In addition, Murphy makes the point, when addressing claims by Bernard F. Huppe, that oral recitation is not required to see a shift in perspective in the Friar’s portrait between his negative depiction of sick lepers and his courteous and lowly service to the noble wealthy since whoever noticed this shift “has already ‘caught the full force of the change’ by his silent reading in order to register it in his voice” (Murphy 207) which would seem to suggest a lack of need to read orally at all. As it happens, I did register vocally in my performance the alteration Huppe refers to, which occurs during the lines “For to deelen with no swich poraille / But al with riche and sellerys of vitaille” (Lines 247-48), and can attest to the fact that this vocal shift does occur naturally due to the clear distinction between the low note in “no” and the high note in “riche”. Therefore, it would seem that both Murphy and Huppe are right in that the distinction is noticeable even in silent reading but also that its full effect cannot be realized without verbal performance. However, neither writer addresses the main reason for oral reading, which is to help separate the many Chaucerian voices within the prologue. On the page, the diversity of voices is harder to hear; however, when performed, one can more easily experience how Chaucer’s voices go beyond the foolishness of the Narrator and the satire of the author and encompass many more variations. While Chaucer’s work is beautiful read silently or recited orally, there is simply no better way to present these multiple voices than through direct engagement with an audience in a performance format.
1b. Portraying Chaucer’s Many Voices

Therefore, one of the most important early decisions made was that I would portray Chaucer himself so that we would have the author on the stage interacting with the audience; by doing so, I was able to present the many different Chaucerian voices rather than simply one. To assume that there is only one or two voices (usually the author and a naïve Narrator character) within the General Prologue is now an outdated viewpoint and this project proceeded with the intention of clearly displaying the variety of voices within the text. C. David Benson has written, “No single ‘Chaucer’ will explain such variety. A foolishly credulous pilgrim accounts for only some of the more ironic portraits like those of the Monk, Prioress or Friar” (27); the rest emphasize the clearly distinct personas and attitudes of the multitude of characters. It is very hard to argue that the Parson’s portrait should be handled with the same vocal style as the Miller’s as the former is more sincere and the latter comic. As well, simply distinguishing between a Narrator and his author while ignoring the rest of Chaucer’s voices within the General Prologue reduces the narrative to a back and forth between a fictional, naïve Narrator’s sincerity and Chaucer’s satire, the depiction of which would be unfortunately dull. Given this, I made sure to clearly emphasize the distinctions between the many Chaucerian voices through physicality and vocalisms. These distinctions will be explained in detail in section four.

Further, the many voices of Chaucer cannot be simply distinguished through physical performance. There is also a need to distinguish between the messages communicated to the audience in each portrait, which is not always satire. As expressed by Derek Pearsall, “If everything is ironical, nothing is interesting, since the reader has been deprived of those conspiratorial pleasures, those satisfactions of knowing that he has joined an elite fraternity of knowingness….and simply has to decode praise as blame and vice versa” (65). In the Canterbury Tales, most effectively when performed live, Chaucer the author presents to the audience multiple voices ranging from his praise of the Plowman’s honest labour, to ridicule of the Pardoner’s hair. Therefore the audience is privy to more than just Chaucer’s satirical attacks, but

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3 Much of the rejection of this view comes from evolutions on the views began with E. Talbot Donaldson’s essay “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” PMLA 69 (1954): 929 and expanded following his later essay “Criseyde and Her Narrator,” in Speaking of Chaucer (London: Athlone, 1970), 68. For an overview of the evolution of views on Chaucer the pilgrim and the possibility of a fictional Narrator, see The Variorum of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer: The General Prologue, Part One A section on the Narrator, pages 40-45.
his wide range of voices expressing deeply diverse opinions. My depiction of the Franklin character, for example, was entirely positive and communicated through jolly physical gestures and a boisterous voice, which depicted a worthy man of the people. The Parson carries no humor and thus required little movement from myself and no creative voice other than my own because he did not need one. Chaucer’s voice alone carries the Parson without any of the irony found in previous portraits. A statement by Lynn Stanley illustrates how “[Chaucer’s] art was an analysis, one that demanded well-honed techniques of indirection and ambiguity that would urge an audience less toward judgement than toward the ability to frame intelligent or provocative questions” (68). So in my performance I avoided portraying each character as a damning satire and instead looked for the individual voice of each pilgrim and relayed that to the audience in a diverse and pointed way.

Using theatricality to describe Chaucer is not a new idea as Kittredge, in the early 20th century, highlighted the Canterbury Tales as a work of drama where the pilgrims were “The dramatis personae” and the stories were “…speeches that were longer than normal” (“Discussion of Marriage” 435). Later writers built on or argued against what has been called “The generally Kittredgian consensus” (Ganim 3). But there is little reason to hold on to this statement by Kittredge as gospel; for whatever the Canterbury Tales is, it is not a play and should not be treated as one. In fact, we structured a play around it with its own script, cast and lighting. The many different Chaucerian voices are not set characters with clearly highlighted dialogue and blocking. They are the product of the actor presenting them, based on sincere research and long, thoughtful rehearsal.

1c. Performance as an Experiment

Applying these theories into a working production ultimately required us to approach it in an experimental matter. To begin with, by applying the concept of performance to the work, we were essentially looking at the Canterbury Tales as an interdisciplinary work, with both literary and performance elements. For much of its existence, Chaucer’s work has been the domain of the academic and not the performer. Since it seems Chaucer himself may have been both a literary author and a performer himself, it would seem that research into Chaucer belongs in multiple fields. In fact, as Paul Strohm has noted, “So pervasive were medieval assumptions about oral performance that even those alone in a room with a manuscript normally constituted
themselves as an audience of one, reading the book aloud and essentially performing it for themselves” (Strohm 196), which suggests that there was never a distinction between literary and performance aspects when the work was composed and so performance should be encouraged as a method of presenting it. Therefore, this project, and the Canterbury Tales itself, requires a broader method of research and experimentation to examine the many ways it can be communicated.

As illustrated by Linda Marie Zaerr, “the use of modern historical performance can provide a tool to explore and inform theories that have until now been based largely on examination of texts” (1). Many such experiments already exist and are useful tools. For example, the Virtual Paul’s Cross John Donne project has been very successful in recreating Donne’s Gunpowder plot sermon⁴. As part of their overview the team states, “This approach is intended to help us to understand and evaluate our assumptions about the… Virtual Paul’s Cross… and – because it is flexible and open to change – to create the opportunity for testing and evaluating multiple models of the event it recreates as new information and new interpretations emerge” (Virtual Paul’s Cross Project)⁵. The same idea is connected to our Chaucer performance. The intention behind our performance is to allow for a new way of looking at the General Prologue by placing it at a point in history and letting the text and the audience’s response speak for themselves. To quote Michael de Certeau, “The importance of dramatic representation lies not only in the artefact that is produced, but also in the way that practice is received and how it is ‘used’ by the audience that witness or participate in the event” (qtd. in Normington 3) If others wish to produce their own performance and improve on what they see here, then the project has done its job.

Nor does this performance negate the value of highly informed research. Rather, it encourages and requires it, since our intention was and is experimental. In addition, no performance is complete without a research component because an actor who does not understand what he says can seldom be as believable as one who does. As Zaerr has stated,

⁴ The Virtual Paul’s Cross John Donne Project can be found here: http://vpcp.chass.ncsu.edu/
⁵ Also used as an inspiration is Bill Bryden’s 1980s production of The Mysteries by Tony Harrison. That production provided a recreation of the Medieval English Mystery Cycle plays. Most notably, it used the audience as part of crowd scenes and kept them nearby, interacting with them at all times to evoke the sense of community that was such an important part of those plays.
“Performance cannot substitute for research…performance can, however, suggest possible explanations for evidence…map out directions for research that have been ignored…and insist on interdisciplinary awareness where we are tempted to compartmentalize” (Zaerr 14). Performance also allows for a shared experience, which helps stimulate valuable discussion. We made use of this by providing a question and answer period afterwards.

Further, I have and will continue to use the word “recreations” to describe this performance. It is not, and should not be considered, a genuine recreation but, as has been mentioned, an experimental work done in the spirit of past performances based on available and determined data. I use the word “recreations” merely because it is the best way to describe our intention to bring to life theorized moments or ideas and explore how they might have come to pass. Although, as Ganim has observed, “…it is a peculiar quality of the Canterbury Tales that each reading of the work is a recreation of the conditions of its creation” (13). Since performance cannot replace, but can greatly assist, scholarly research it stands to reason that the field of literary studies, particularly the work of an individual who has thought highly of audience engagement, can only benefit from such experiments.

2. The Structure of the Performance

While the previous section described the theoretical concepts behind the performance, this section discusses the structural decisions behind how the performance was designed so as to effectively communicate our theory to our audience. First, this section provides an explanation for our decision to set the performance on a particular day, June 6, 1389. This date, we felt, had a special relevance due to its proximity to Richard II’s reclaiming of his authority from the Lords Appellant and the possible completion of the General Prologue by Chaucer. Much like the theoretical ideas expressed above, the choice of this date was entirely speculative but not thought about lightly. Second, this section describes the aesthetic choices behind the set and lighting as well as the frame narrative that surrounded the performance. Third, this section looks at my

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6 This section owes a particular debt to Paul Strohm, whose work *Chaucer’s Tale: 1386* has helped shape and further expand upon the historical setting of our performance. However, I also consulted works such as Lynn Stanley’s *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* and *The Court of Richard II* by Gervase Matthew. For the more technical aspects, I consulted works like *The Medieval Theatre in the Round* by Richard Southern and *Staging Conventions in Medieval English Theatre* by Philip Butterworth, a recent and engaging source on how medieval performers engaged with their audiences.
relationship as the performer to the audience and how deeply important the audience was to the final product. The importance of the audience has not been under-emphasized in this paper, but here it is explored more specifically. Our desire was to allow the audience to feel part of the performance, and to experience our interpretation in a manner that involved them. These methods allowed us to create an interactive and understandable structure that gave the audience a chance to feel part of an experience enabled by the research and experimentation defined in the above section.

2a. Relevance of the Date

If you google June 6th, 1389, you won’t find much. You certainly won’t find anything that states that Chaucer entertained the court of Richard II on that date. But around that date you will find Richard’s return to power after the tyranny of the Lords Appellant on May 3, 1389. On that date, the twenty-year old Richard called his lords to the Marcolf Chamber at Westminster, announced emphatically that he was assuming control of the kingdom for himself, as was due him by law, and swore to unburden his people of taxation and to work for their prosperity. As well, by July, Chaucer returned from his semi-exile in Kent, where he had been removed from his political support, friends and, worst of all, his audience due to the actions of the Lords Appellant, which included the targeting and execution of several of Richard’s loyalists. It is possible that around this point, Chaucer had also completed the General Prologue or was nearing its completion. The unification of Richard’s reclaiming of authority and pledge to help his people, alongside Chaucer’s return from exile to the audience he had lost, made this date significant. Therefore, two colleagues (Kyle Dase and Meagan Wall) were asked to portray Richard and Anne and to enter before I did and seat themselves. We had the audience rise for their entrance so as to draw the audience into the moment. Additionally, a preamble presented by

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7 Richard asserted his authority by saying these words “…You know that I have long been ruled by guardians and that I was not allowed to do even the smallest thing without their approval. So now for the future I am dismissing these guardians from my council, and, as an heir of lawful age, shall invite on to the council whomever I wish, and I shall handle my own affairs myself. And this being so my first command is that the chancellor should hand back to me the seal.” (Preest 268) With this command, England was handed back to him and began the period of rebirth we emphasized in our performance. The idea of the seal being handed back to him very much suggests England itself was being handed back to him. For more see Preest’s translation of The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham, pages 268-69 and Nigel Saul’s Richard II, Ch. 9.

8 Among the many victims of these atrocities was Thomas Usk, an admirer of Chaucer’s. See Strohm 192-93.

9 Riverside Chaucer 3rd Ed. Page xxiv
Professor Robinson (portraying Edmund Stafford, Lord Privy Seal\textsuperscript{10}) informed the crowd that Chaucer had invited representatives of all levels of England’s society to be present as a means of highlighting Chaucer’s work as a statement on England’s poor condition and his hope for progress under the steerage of Richard II\textsuperscript{11}. All of these details were to give a sense of authenticity and importance so that the audience would feel part of something new and exciting.

Truly, there is little reason to believe that any particular performance from Chaucer can be confirmed but much to believe performances did occur, as Paul Strohm, John M. Ganim and others cited here have demonstrated. Our setting in Richard II’s court was intended to place the audience in a position where they would act as both our modern audience and the court. By doing so, we allowed the audience to feel as involved as possible. Most important, we subverted their expectations by presenting the prologue as a “new work.” As stated earlier, we mentioned prior to the performance that Chaucer had requested that people from all levels of English society be invited to hear his new work, which would address the social issues facing England. By tying it in with the idea of rebirth under Richard II, we hoped to provide the audience with the feeling of experiencing the work as it may have originally been intended. Gervase Matthews says, “Sections of the \textit{Canterbury Tales} may have been read at the court and rewarded, but they can never have been limited to a court public” (72). Therefore, we made a point of highlighting the work as something for all, not just the nobility.

Our use of this date and its relevance is nonetheless complicated since it is hard to present a classic work without allowing modern sensibilities and motivations to emerge. My intention at first was simply to present the work in a public setting and avoid any commentary at all. However, as we proceeded, the idea of associating the \textit{Canterbury Tales} potential connection with King Richard II became more interesting and valuable. We know from works such as Paul Strohm’s \textit{Chaucer’s Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury} that Chaucer spent time both amongst the wealthy and the poor and knew much about the country and therefore was familiar

\textsuperscript{10} Stafford was not only a loyal supporter of Richard, he often publicly defended the king’s agenda more than once. As well, as the Lord Privy Seal, he was the best choice to speak on behalf of the king for our “court.” See Saul 250-51.

\textsuperscript{11} Many of Chaucer’s life records indicate deep ties to the court of Richard II, including Lancastrian connections from his wife Philippa’s sister, Katherine, as well to John of Gaunt and Nicholas Bembre. Coupled with the fact that Richard granted Chaucer positions of authority, these records all but guarantee that they met at least once or twice. See Strohm, 222..
with the country’s various social classes. As well, we accepted that the audience would bring in their own sensibilities and since, just as we can never recreate the original performance, we can never bring back the original audience we chose to let the audience experience the work however they chose.

2b. Physical Set and Frame

We decided to set the performance in Sheen Palace, Richard and Anne’s favourite residence, so as to create a courtly setting with additional historical relevance. Sheen Palace held such a special place in Richard’s heart that, not six years after the date of our performance, following Anne’s death from the plague, he had it torn down out of grief\(^\text{12}^\). It could be said that the best part of Richard II lay within Sheen Palace. Therefore, to help emphasize the hopefulness of this time of his reign, our choice to set the production there was meaningful. We accomplished this through a simple but effective set design. To evoke a sense of courtliness without relying on its presence, a minimalist set was used with the intention of capturing the feel of a royal gathering. Since we decided that using too many elaborate sets would look hollow and fake, the performance relied on the audience and the text itself to create the ambiance with the set as a functional backdrop.

The king and queen sat directly facing Chaucer, in a position of special prominence. Stafford sat next to them in a lower chair so as to be positioned higher than the crowd but lower than the king and queen. The crowd was placed surrounding a thrust stage to ensure that “Chaucer” would be surrounded by people on all sides. This created the image that Chaucer was speaking amongst the people, not above or apart from them, which was intended to highlight the idea of the work as important for all of England. This made the set usable for a modern crowd while retaining some resemblance to what medieval staging might have been like. As well, it has been documented that “an audience for [an] event sat on three or four sides and actors entered via the screens from one end of the space” (Normington 114) which was exactly how we staged our entrances. Richard and Anne and their councillors would have been seated much higher than they were but space issues made this impossible. Still, the set, as it was structured, achieved the

necessary feel of a courtly setting without making the audience uncomfortable or limiting my movement.

Minimal lighting was used and only applied so as to distinguish the setting of Richard’s court from the modern setting of Saskatoon. During the performance, I interacted and addressed members of the “court” directly so as to give the audience a sense of presence. We kept the lights up on the audience so as to allow for easy engagement. The audience’s participation, though minimal, played an important role in creating the atmosphere of the performance and so we chose not to separate the stage and audience through dark lighting. Therefore, it is a shame that the video footage of the performance available on Youtube does not pick up any footage of the audience responding to the performance, save for their presence in more wide shots. This was an oversight on my part that will be rectified in future performances.

2c. Importance of the Audience

Much has been said in this paper so far about the importance of our audience. Indeed, as Edmund Reiss has stated, “The problem…is that Chaucer's poetry does give a real sense of an immediate audience. And this audience may be so important in the construction of Chaucer's poetry that, if we ignore it, we are rejecting something essential to the understanding of Chaucer's artistry” (Reiss 390). Everything done in preparation was based on ensuring that I would be able to engage with the audience. There was never any moment where we felt the audience should feel detached from the action. We wished to make the audience look at the work in a new way; therefore, by engaging them we were able to shock them into experiencing something they had not seen before.

Of course, as Paul Ruggiers has stated, “Chaucer's awareness of an immediate listening audience may have resulted in his using and even relying on its presence. Rather than seek to ignore this audience, we should see that, at least in part, because of Chaucer's awareness of its presence, his poetry involves the modern reader as much as it does.” (29) Acknowledging the importance of the audience raises its own problems as a modern audience will never be the original audience. They will not approach the performance with the same expectations or engage with it the same way. These concerns echo Zaerr’s statement that “our shared allusions, our sense of what is comic or deeply moving, are very different. We do not speak the same language they did. Even the weather is different: at the medieval performance the audience may have been
seriously distracted by chilly, damp feet in an unusual cold snap” (15). As a means of addressing this concern, the performance avoided attempts to force our audience to examine the work with a specific mindset; we gave them the structure but what they did with it was their own business. They were brought in to participate, but they remained a normal, modern audience. This same philosophy affected the rest of the production as well.

With all this in mind, our performance also operated with the understanding that knowledge of performance in the Middle Ages is largely unknown. Therefore, structurally, we had to use our imaginations more often than not. Visual representations or “clues” within Chaucer’s verse are of little real use either, as noted by Mark C. Amodio, “while narrative moments in which poets directly address their listening audiences…they do not necessarily reveal anything at all about the mix of oral and literate poetics contained in any given text but witness a text’s ‘orality’ only in the broadest sense of the term.” (Amodio 97) Since there is no way of reaching those distant places, one can only speculate; however, our speculation was based on strong research in preparation for this performance. As Zaerr argues, “Any performance is complete; it cannot omit features that are historically uncertain…When we speculate, we articulate the pieces of solid information that led to that speculation.” (Zaerr 175) Therefore, our performance, done in the spirit of Chaucer’s work and the condition of his world at the time, embraced speculation and allowed for a richer experience of the work overall.

3. Meter and Pronunciation

While the first two sections presented both theoretical and structural features behind the performance, these final two will focus on the actual performance itself. This section looks at how I chose to pronounce and deliver certain words and lines, as well as the difficulty of achieving authenticity with the language. Again, three topics will be examined. The first topic looks at the difficulty of presenting the text in Middle English to a crowd used to Modern English and my own struggles with it during preparation, such as developing a trusting and respectful relationship with the audience so that my delivery of the language could come across as natural instead of condescending. This topic also discusses my use of the Hengwrt manuscript. The second topic discusses the final -e and how I chose to use, or not use, it based on my interpretations of each line. I will discuss the final -e generally, then speak about words such as “hadde” along with others. The third topic is a list of lines that proved difficult or interesting and
how I chose to deliver them. These include a line that was vague, one that was natural and one that allowed for great humor. These examples show how Chaucer’s voices take on different rhythms and tones and required me to think hard about how to pronounce them based both on the general rules of Chaucer’s meter and my own interpretations when necessary. Each of these topics highlight how my trust of the words and my attempt to gain solid pronunciation was integral to developing the relationship with the audience I strived for and present Chaucer’s voices with total clarity.

3a. Middle and Modern English

Adjusting oneself to a new system of pronunciation is challenging, and to do so while performing does not help. I speak not only of myself since my performance had to help an audience of newcomers adjust to the language as well, which was a major concern at the beginning of the project. We expected the audience to be a surprised at how different Chaucer’s English is from our own since, as Simon Horobin has stated, “The availability of Chaucer’s work in translations into modern English, or modernized versions, encourages the view that Chaucer’s work is more similar to present-day English than is really the case” (Chaucer’s Language 2) and reactions from the crowd indicated we were correct. Nevertheless, presenting the work in Middle English was as fundamental in our performance as it is for any element of Chaucerian studies, since Chaucer’s voices require their creator’s original wording in order to be conveyed properly. Therefore, both an adjustment and subversion of expectations for the audience had to occur so that we could present the work as authentically as possible. A translation was provided behind me that the audience could follow (though many chose not too). However, for the most part, the audience was presented with a language alien to them.

As a means of building a trusting, communicative relationship with the audience, it was crucial for me to present the language as sincerely as possible without condescension or suggesting a lack of respect for their intelligence. I wished to present it with genuine clarity and trusted them to follow along, which they did. To accomplish this, I utilized a tone of voice that was conversational and natural to help build a trusting, relaxed relationship with the audience. Many stated afterwards that while they initially had difficulty, they caught on to the language as
I proceeded. Others were less able to catch on but were still able to follow thanks to our translation behind me and my physical gestures. Of course, thanks to Chaucer’s wonderful poetry, all those who were asked said they enjoyed it immensely.

Fortunately, I was able to work from a solid base. As part of our ambition to get as close to original Chaucer as we could, I used a transcription of the Hengwrt manuscript as my rehearsal text rather than a modern edition. Over Ellesmere, for a long time the primary manuscript used by editors and scholars, “Hengwrt has found greater favour because it lacks the signs of editorial improvement which are a feature of Ellesmere. It is therefore assumed to be the manuscript closest to Chaucer’s original and the best one from which to base an edition.” (Burnley 6) As with a carefully structured edition, our performance needed to adhere to the concepts Chaucer felt most important. There is certain consistency within the spelling of Hengwrt to help a performer deliver the lines with an understandable, consistent quality. For example, the spelling throughout Hengwrt reveals highly consistent patterns for certain words, most notably words such as “agayn” and “thogh.” Burnley, Samuels and L.D. Benson all used Hengwrt, along with Ellesmere, to attempt to uncover what these artefacts can tell us about Chaucer’s pronunciation and although some scholars, such as Horobin and Geoffrey Lester, have not found their work encouraging, this manuscript stands as a valuable resource for performance due to it being “likely the oldest surviving manuscript” (L.D Benson 1119) 14. Having this text allowed for me to trust the words without consulting other manuscripts, which in turn enabled the audience to place their trust in me and thus become more engaged in the performance.

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13 Reponses from crowd members generally suggested that while the language was difficult at first, they were able to pick up on patterns that enabled them to adjust to the pre-great vowel shift pronunciations as well as the meaning of antiquated words such as “swich” and “gentil.”
14 Thanks to Linda Mooney’s deduction, there is good evidence to show that the scribe behind the manuscript may have been Adam Pinkhurst, a contemporary of Chaucer’s and most probably the subject of a poem about his poor copying skills. Because of the manuscripts closeness to the presumed original, our use of Hengwrt was as useful to our performance recreation as it is to reconstructions of the original artefact, as Simon Horobin explains, “Even if the poet did not supervise the production of Hengwrt, or the later Ellesmere manuscript, the possibility that Pinkhurst knew of Chaucer’s plans for the work accords special authority to those copies over all other witnesses.” (“Adam Pinkhurst” 352).
3b. The Final -e

Of course, even though Hengwrt is reliable, there still remained moments of confusion, particularly regarding the use of the final –e. The final –e is one of the more jarring distinctions between Middle and Modern English and needed to be conveyed delicately so as to not become distracting to the audience. Modern readers can find Chaucer’s use of the final –e difficult. Sometimes lines can seem as though they have upwards of thirteen syllables if every final –e is pronounced, an example being the line, “What sholde he studie / and make hym seluen wood” (line 184). Lengthy lines such as this led to very specific and careful eliminations of the final –e, as well as the middle –e, when necessary. To ensure a clear, understandable delivery of the lines I had to be meticulous with meter and careful so that it could also work rhythmically with the rest of the poem. Arthur O. Sandved has stated that “the prevailing view today is that final –e was disappearing in London English about Chaucer’s time, and that Chaucer pronounced it or omitted it as his metre required” (16). Yet certain words such as “soote” and “roote”, which together constitute the poem’s first rhyme retain the final –e. As well, we must consider words such as “every,” which contains a removable-medial syllable so that it was always pronounced “ev’ry” during my performance. As well, the final –e can often be elided with other syllables, as explained below. What these rules show is that while Chaucer may have allowed for some liberality with his meter and spelling, he still maintained several consistent rules regarding the pronunciation of the final –e. My intention was to follow them as faithfully as possible. The Hengwrt manuscript was, therefore, valuable because it represents these rules with the most accuracy and consistency.

However, as useful as Hengwrt is, I could not follow it too zealously as sometimes I needed to remove vowels in order to make a line work. One of the most prominent decisions I made was to completely remove any and all cases of the final –e on “hadde”, pronouncing it much like our modern “had” while retaining the near-open front unrounded æ sound. My main reason for removal was that it often naturally elided with following vowels, though I still

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15 The disagreements between James G. Southworth and E.T. Donaldson on the final –e are well known and were consulted for this section, but were not my main sources. David Burnley and his book A Guide to Chaucer’s Language as well as Chaucer’s Final –E: Some Discourse Considerations were consulted here along with others. The writings of Simon Horobin proved impossible to avoid as well as Arthur Wayne Glowka, Arthur Sandved, Ruben Njod and of course the ideas of Bernhard Ten Brink. I intended to get a feel for the rules as well as the uncertainties present in Chaucer’s language.
removed it even when it did not elide so as to maintain consistency with my audience. For example, a good case of elision is the line “so hadde I spoken with hem euerichoon” (line 31), where the final –e can be removed since it elides with the following “I” sound naturally. In a later line reading “Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne” (line 52) I still removed the final –e because, despite no elision being present, I felt it appropriate to do so. Still later, in the Miller’s portrait, “hadde” rhymes with “spaade”. Since when a line ends with a final –e it is, far more often than not, pronounced and there was little reason to believe the final –e on “spaade” should not be pronounced, I resolved that this example of “hadde” did need its final -e. However, given that the next line begins with “a”, perhaps an argument could be presented that Chaucer allows for this “hadde” to elide into the following line. One can say “spaade” with the final -e and ignore the final -e on “hadde” because the next word they say will be the same sound, thereby continuing the rhyme. Far more likely is it that both words should be spoken with the final –e but this example demonstrates the options one is offered when exploring Chaucer’s meter.

Other examples include the listing of the guildsmen. One could feasibly say the final –e on the “Haberdasshere”, the “Webbe” and the “Dyere”, or just as feasibly none at all. I chose to use the final –e on “Webbe” exclusively because it felt the most affected by the loss; however, considering the fact that it is followed by “a”, the “Webbe” could also be elided with that sound and work just as well. Another example is the Shipman’s line “be watre he sent hem home to every lond” (line 402) where the elision with “he” after “watre” is absolutely necessary. An investigation into the spelling “watre” found that this spelling occurs only in the Hengwrt and Christchurch manuscripts, the latter possibly copied from a manuscript by the same scribe16. Since this spelling seems so specific, it is clear the elision with “he” was important and so I faithfully followed these examples. These examples show how important meter and spelling were to Chaucer and thus how important it is to stay faithful to them as well as why using the Hengwrt manuscript was so important.

16 Source: Peter Robinson.
3c. Challenging and Interesting Lines

Ultimately, my work with both of the above sections was tested when faced with lines I found particularly challenging. Many of Chaucer’s lines are challenging because they carry references or make statements hard to convey to an audience unfamiliar with Middle English. One of the most prominent of these is in the Man-of-Law’s portrait. There is a moment in the middle of the brief portrait where the Man-of-Law’s impressive legal memory are described: “In termes hadde he caas and doomes alle/ that fro tyme of Kyng William weere falle” (line 325-26). As most of the terms in these lines are markedly different from their modern equivalents, they cannot be helpfully conveyed to an audience unfamiliar with the language in any vocally creative way, nor physically. In fact, without the translation behind us, it is likely the meaning of these lines might have been lost to the audience. I simply chose to put a great deal of stress on the name King William and carried the line with a drawn out pace so as to emphasize the Man-of-Law’s knowledge as far reaching and important.

Other moments provided opportunity rather than challenge. One particular occurrence was the second line of the Clerk’s portrait, “That unto logic hadde longe ygo” (line 288). Chaucer presents this character as a tired, thin figure and so I stretched the o sound greatly to convey that feeling. I elongated several other o’s afterwards, such as “But looked holwo, and thereto sobrly” (line 291) and even more in the following line, “ful threedbaare was his ouereste courtepy” (line 292). Obviously, Chaucer did not plan on academics and performers presenting, or even studying, his work centuries later but he clearly had a fondness for his language’s strengths and weaknesses, and like a good modern comedian understood how best to structure it to achieve the maximum amount of humour from each word.

There are multiple instances of humour that are much stronger when performed rather than read. In the Friar’s portrait, for example, Chaucer takes a short aside during his regaling of the Friar’s deeds to simply praise him as a person. This aside consists of two lines reading, “Ther was no man nowheer so virtuous/ He was the beste beggere of his hous” (line 251-52), which is clearly an example of an ironic Chaucerian voice. As Chaucer is poetry, there is a musicality to

17 I admit to speaking the Physician’s line “Anoon he yaf the sike man his boote” (49) completely wrong. This occurred because I allowed my modern conception of the word “boote” to overwhelm my need to carefully research every word. I assumed it meant “boot” as we know it now but that is simply not the case. This shows how important research is to a performance like this.
the meter and so timing is integral. Chaucer’s poetry “points, and allows the listener to relish – especially in live reading, where an audience’s pleasure is heightened by being able to participate in shared delight at what is funny” (Saunders 269). This is especially true for the Canterbury Tales because those who tell the tales are already addressing a group of fictional characters. Therefore, the concept of shared reaction is a fundamental theme of the poem. To deliver this joke I simply let the pronunciation and the rhythm of the meter deliver the joke for me and succeeded in obtaining laughter. Ultimately, delivering the language with sincerity and respect for the audience’s intelligence enabled the proper reaction from these deliveries. My sincerity also helped improve the audience’s ability to catch on to the language as best they could. Trust and respect between audience and actor is of paramount importance and was upheld in my performance strongly.

4. Characterization

This section examines my depictions of the characters, focusing on three in particular so as to provide a window into how each of the above sections shaped the portrayal of these figures during the actual performance. First is the question of the narrative voice and why my performance avoided utilizing a fictional narrator and instead used Chaucer as a performer of his own work. This is followed by a description of how the narrative voice cannot be defined by one single voice or attitude and I then conclude by describing how I utilized these voices. Second is the Knight, for whom I take the position of Terry Jones’ perspective of the Knight as a mercenary figure. I present why I subscribe to this logic, the challenges that presenting it posed and then how I dealt with those challenges. The third is the Summoner, whose portrait is a great performance piece. I discuss why he lends himself to performance so well. As well, I discuss his physicality and the many alterations in voice and tone that occur within his portrait. I pay particular attention to line 649, “He was a gentil harlot and a kynde” (line 649), which can only be fully realized through performance, and describe how I delivered it and why I made that choice. Each of these portrayals depended on a faithful commitment to all of the concepts mentioned in the previous sections. It was my intention that each portrayal would be unique and memorable, so every portrait made use of Chaucer’s many voices.
4a. Chaucer the Performer

As this was a theatrical production, I had to define a characterization for Chaucer the author in a way that was faithful and yet worked in a theatrical setting. As Gelsim has stated, “The most elusive Chaucerian character, the figure of Chaucer himself, is theatrically represented…so much so that it has become one of the tropes of modern Chaucer criticism to address his degree of fictionality, precisely that which theatricality simultaneously invites and frustrates” (6-7). As this was a historical based performance, I was myself portraying a speculative Chaucer as both an author and as a performer. By doing so, I did not have to rely on the often discussed fictional Narrator figure since the Chaucerian voices can come directly from the author’s persona. Benson has stated that “the first person Narrator never develops into a fully realized character but remains vague and elusive” (26). However, more than that, a fictional Narrator runs the risk of putting up yet another barrier between Chaucer and his audience. What live performance demonstrates is that there is no need to create a distinct character, the narrator is Chaucer the performer using his ironic voices to create the portraits and generate the humor, satire or sincerity found within the portraits.

Kittredge dismissed the utterly false notions that Chaucer the author and Chaucer the pilgrim were identical representations of each other and “most of us now accept the proposition that Chaucer was sophisticated as readily as we do the proposition that the whale is a mammal.” (Donaldson 929) Yet debate on whether the narrative voice in the prologue represents a distinct character remains, with C. David Benson, as late as the 1980s, lamenting that as a result of this debate “…the historical Chaucer is banished from the pilgrimage only to be replaced by a dramatic persona” (27). This statement underscores a lack of willingness to consider that the narrative voice in the prologue is merely the multitude of voices available to the performer. There does not need to be either an historical Chaucer or a fictional character because the general vagueness of the figure allows for the part to be filled by the performer delivering the work and the dramatic irony and spirited playfulness of Chaucer’s poetry is the reason the General Prologue contains as many Chaucerian voices as it does. Benson is right when he states, “Chaucer appears in the Canterbury Tales not as a consistently developed personality, but as a teller of tales” (30). I hope my performance helps clarify that Chaucer’s voice is not one, but

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many. Therefore it might be best to view the narrative figure within the prologue as not a narrator, but a performer. In my case, the performer was Chaucer himself performing his own work and therefore there was no need for a fictional narrator since the author himself was “present”.

So just what are these Chaucerian voices and how diverse are they? They different voices are sometimes operating at the same time. For example, the lines in the Friar’s portrait, “He hadde makked ful many a marriage / of yonge women at his owene cost” (line 212-13) we hear both the Friar’s boastful voice dominant in the first line, and then the ironic voice of Chaucer the author in the second line emerges alongside the Friars. Sometimes the voices are merely descriptive as with the Yeoman, or judgemental as with the Pardoner. The voices can be romantic, as the physical descriptions of the Prioress and Wife of Bath show and they often clash with each other, giving the audience an opportunity to guess which voice is Chaucer's, and which is his characters. As well, there are sometimes darker voices beneath the seeming optimism of his prologue, as Ian Richardson has stated, “Chaucer is not tolerant. He sees the grim things as straight as Dante; he shows their grimness (which is to be intolerant of them) and finds them funny nonetheless” (86) In order to present all these voices, adding a complex fictional character into the mix only serves to complicate and confuse matters. Chaucer leaves his narrative voice vague and elusive because it is meant for the performer to take up the role him or herself. Statements by scholars such as Kane, who states, “Chaucer does not seem to be much interested in his narrator” (9) are technically right, but misleading because there really isn’t a narrator to be interested in, rather a series of voices for a performer to discover and explore.

4b. The Knight

The Knight was a challenge because the opinion of him as a heroic figure is so ingrained. Projecting an alternative to an audience familiar with that image required both subversion and familiarity. The interpretation of the Knight as a mercenary, popularized by Terry Jones, who

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19 In an eloquent defense of a fictional narrator, Roland Miles has elaborated on the description of the Prioress, “We gain a further glimpse of this romantic side to his character when he describes the Prioress. If we divert our gaze from the author’s criticism of her pretensions and her worldliness, and focus on the pilgrim Chaucer’s response to her, we see him examining her in a most inappropriate fashion, as an attractive woman, as the romantic heroine implied by the name she has taken for herself, Madame Eglientyne.” (Miles, Chaucer the Actor: The Canterbury Tales as Performance Art.). Yet a much simpler explanation is that this how both the Prioress sees herself as well as how outsiders view her. These are simply more of More of Chaucer’s voices.
helped with the production and was gracious enough to offer his presence and opinions, is strong when one looks at the specifics of the portrait. The Knight’s battles are not really battles, but massacres; he works with heathens so he can kill other heathens and the portrait is riddled with violent imagery. The Knight’s portrait begins with a recollection of his youth and the reverence he received from his earliest lords, then recounts his battles. An ironically reverential Chaucerian voice enthusiastically lists all the legendary places the Knight has spilled blood. I used exaggerated sword-swinging gestures that were meant to project the image of someone not quite grasping what he is doing or saying. The Knight is also connected to several chivalric romance staples such as “trowth” and the idea of fighting for Christ’s sake. But the ideas of trowth and honour for the knight are only as good as his coin. He is clearly willing to fight for Christ against heathens, but then will happily turn around and work with heathens to fight other heathens. There is no physical representation of a noble man’s chivalrousness; “he is not endowed with any physical beauty or grace; there is no mention of any family background, no coat of arms…He shows no interest in the courtly pastimes of hunting, hawking or courtly love” (Jones 2). As well, “Chaucer would have seen in the field…all the great knights in [the] early and triumphant phase of the war with France” (Morgan 118). So we know his understanding of knights was likely broad. As such, I chose to avoid sincerity and opt for satire instead.

Portraying the Knight from this unconventional perspective required me to highlight Chaucer’s vicious satire through an ironically reverential voice. The best way to do that, I felt, was to act both childish and awestruck. There are a number of strangely vicious images in my performance that seem to run counter to the words being said. My idea was that, from the Knight’s perspective, there would be nothing unusual about the savagery being described given how long knights had been acting in that way (Jones 4-13), however, an audience would find the images slightly disturbing. A key example of such violent imagery accompanying the words is the slicing motion I made across my neck when I said “In lystes thryes and ay slayn his foo” (line 63), which does not seem to fit into the later image of a “parfit, gentil knyght” (line 72). Perhaps it would be better to look at my portrayal as that of a child not yet comprehending the violence he or she is acting out. Jones references something like this as happening in the Middle Ages, “The fact that common soldiers and itinerant mercenaries, who were going about in armed bands terrorizing the countryside and lording it over the peasantry, were also styling themselves
knights, was a grim reminder of a changing world” (Jones 11). The Knight carries himself well as a man of good standing, and so I made a point at the end of the prologue, when the Knight speaks briefly, to give him the voice of an alpha male. The Chaucerian voice in this portrait is one of the prologue’s better voices as it carries the feel of an awe-struck, fawning fan of the Knight. In performance, more than silent reading, this comes across strongly and humorously.

Ultimately, one’s portrayal of the Knight depends largely on how one interprets Chaucer’s depiction of the character. If one believes Chaucer’s intention is satire, as Jones does, then he should portrayed as a violent mercenary and if not then the sincerity of the language would still be lovely to hear for an audience. However, the concept of the Knight as a satire of the mercenary class allows for clever ways to play with the character. I also feel that going for humor rather than sincerity at the beginning makes the Parson’s portrait more poignant, as it emerges quietly and unexpectedly after most characters have been portrayed humorously. The depiction of the quiet, but inspiring, Parson comes as quite the surprise and allows for the audience to get a sense of the diversity of the people present and learn that Chaucer did not think entirely poorly of England.

4c. The Summoner

The Summoner, from a performance standpoint, is the most interesting and engaging character in Chaucer’s General Prologue. The Summoner, above all characters, helped confirm how beneficial performance is to the Canterbury Tales. He is an unusual creation: “We may ponder not only how Chaucer’s actual audience would have responded to the inclusion of so preposterous an idea in his fictional world, but also, within that fiction, how the fictive audience of pilgrims would have responded to so undesirable a fellow traveler and story-teller” (Andrew 323). Yet this is the point of the Summoner. He is meant to stand out as a grotesque, inhuman

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23 Historical witnesses corroborate with the view of the violence of knights being a problem, “What particularly worries all our witnesses is not primarily common or garden crime, not country folk attacking their lordly exploiters, not simply urban unrest, not tax revolt, but the violence of knights. The medieval problem of order took on its particular contours because the lay elite combined autonomy and proud violence in the defence of honour” (Kaeuper 28)

24 One of the more interesting factors of the Knight’s portrait is that it comes first on the list, rather than, say, the Parson, who Chaucer seems to admire the most. This could illustrate several factors, including how the knight sees himself, or perhaps Chaucer intends to set the tone with his satire.

25 I was not alone in feeling this as the Summoner came up several times in conversations with people later. The Summoner came late in the rehearsal process and seemed strange upon beginning my work on him, and only became stranger as I proceeded.
creature who only gets worse the more human he seems. In fact, rather than fearing how the audience would respond, I greatly anticipated their surprise and shock at this bizarre personality. As with the rest of my interpretations, the Summoner carries many voices within him. The combination of these multiple voices with each individual interpretation requires an actor performing live to truly be communicated effectively. The audience has to experience the voice of the author, the performer and the Summoner to get the full effect, and Chaucer provides clear voices to allow any actor to do just that.

The Summoner starts out as a scary presence, as “in the Summoner’s characterization, Chaucer does not give us as wide a range of…details as he does in most of the other portraits. Rather, he begins with the man's face as it manifests evident disease” (Braswell- Means 268). However, as the portrait proceeds, he goes from an inhuman monstrosity to a monstrous human, which I portrayed through multiple shifts in both my physicality and voice. There are perhaps four shifts in voice within the Summoner’s portrait. First, there is the disgusting physical description, for which I utilized my whole body in a contorted, frightening way. My voice shifted after line 647, where I used a mocking voice to imitate the Summoner, “Ay questio quid iuirs wolde he crye” (line 648). Following that is an abrupt shift at line 649, which I will elaborate on later. After that, up until about line 661, we see the Summoner from his own perspective and are thus hearing his voice. At line 660, “Purs is the ercedeknes helle seyde he” (line 660), the voice shifts from the Summoner’s again after yet another impression of the man. Chaucer’s irony is self-evident when these voices are balanced against each other. It is truly ridiculous that, despite how pitiful the Summoner is, the poetry seems to suggest more amusement than shock. The portrait might seem straightforward, given Chaucer the author’s general contempt for the character but the fact that my portrayal began with me looking like some sort of demon and ending with me laughing at the Summoner’s choice of “bokelar” shows how this is actually a diverse and engaging portrait containing many voices, not just one.

The switch at line 649, “He was a gentil harlot and kynde” (line 649), is highlighted here because it represents a moment where the many voices of Chaucer are utilized perfectly. However, it is so abrupt and strange that, without performance, it could be easily missed. Read silently, these lines seem out of place and contradictory to what has been said before. Once performed, however, it becomes clear that, up to this point, this description has been an
“exaggeration” of the character. At the start, the performer and Chaucer the author seem to share an equal opinion of the man as vile and disgusting. However, here, we learn that their voices are distinct! The Chaucer the performer believes his physical descriptions of the character to have been a joke, but Chaucer the author is sincere in his disgust. How can the Summoner be both “gentil” and a “kynde” while also being a “harlot?” Chaucer uses this line to show how ridiculous (and ironic) it is that the performer can still find the Summoner acceptable, given that they share the same visualization of him. This joke, which I made clear by throwing in some laughter and reading the next line reassuringly, helps to clarify just how integral using many voices is. In this line, Chaucer’s, the performer’s and the Summoner’s voices are all utilized at once. Throughout the Summoner’s portrait, shifts like this allow the audience to experience a character who is frightening, ridiculous and despicable all at the same time, and all expressed through different voices. It is a moment of shock, realization and humor that showcases Chaucer’s brilliant use of multiple voices. Performance is the best way to present this joke because without making it clear it simply appears to be a bizarre change in tone. I highlight this line because it generated the most discussion from the crowd; however, there are many others that reveal the power of performance for Chaucer’s work.

5. Conclusion

By experimenting with live performance, we were able to engage the audience directly and portray the many voices of Chaucer more diversely. By setting the performance during a particular moment in history, however fictional, we were able to construct a solid foundation with which to provide an audience a chance to participate in the performance. By committing to genuine Middle English, we were able to build a trusting, respectful relationship with the audience. Finally, by demonstrating the multiple voices within each character, we were able to fully realize the diversity Chaucer presents to his audience. These are pleasures not achievable in silent reading, and only to a lesser degree in oral recitation. While performance cannot replace study, and cannot provide evidence that can only come from rigorous research done at libraries and compiled in books, performance offers a valuable method of helping to provide clarification of the results of that research and is a useful tool for introducing Chaucer to newcomers and providing something new to experts.
This paper has discussed what I discovered while I was preparing to perform and during the performance itself. However, I have also discovered that there is still more work to be done and so I will continue to give performances and expand on what I have achieved. The next step in this process is to continue with the Tales and then bring this process to other works of the Medieval period, as well as the Old English period and Renaissance as well, and perhaps even later works. I have also learned something about Chaucer himself. Despite his pointed and sometimes scathing satire, in my opinion, Chaucer was an optimist and he loved the spring, loved the fields and the people of his country, loved his audience and was genuinely excited at the prospect of sharing his work with them. Our goal was to bring his boundless enthusiasm to our project and I hope we have succeeded. Of the many discoveries made during this project, perhaps the level of joy Chaucer injects into his work is the most valuable.
Works Cited


