

A MIDDLE ENGLISH LESSON ON READING ALOUD



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In this paper we present the edition and a brief commentary of a Middle English short tract written presumably by a follower of John Leylond. The text, apparently the draft of a lesson addressed to priests-to-be, deals with an extended practice in medieval times: reading aloud. The author emphasises the importance of suprasegmental features such as intonation, pause position and word stress and gives the guidelines to handle these skills. A study of the author's treatment of these features as well as classical and contemporary considerations of punctuation as a visual aid for a good performance of the text are also considered in this paper.

Reading aloud was a very extended practice in the Middle Ages. It did not consist in scanning a text silently with the eye, but rather in listening to a text that 'spoke' through someone's mouth (Clemoes 1952, 7; Clanchy 1993, 266-72). In this way, the reader became a mediator between the text and the audience who transmitted the meaning and spirit of the text. Thus, reading aloud properly was crucial.

The teaching of this skill is the subject matter of a short piece recorded in MS. Bodley 832 (S.C. 2358), 18v-19r.¹ It is a manuscript written in English and Latin and, rather than a definite text, it looks like a draft version of a lesson (Hunt 1980, 185). Its elementary nature does not differ from other writings of the period;² however, the author's interest goes beyond the simple recognition of words and their correct pronunciation, which was one of the didactic purposes of medieval song and reading schools (Courtenay 1987, 17). Instead, he is concerned with aspects pertaining to a higher level of education such as the suprasegmental features of intonation, pause position and word stress. These are questions which become especially relevant to future priests, for whom this lesson was probably designed (*cf.* line 37).³

Intonation is one of the topics considered in this lesson; this should not surprise us since, according to Clemoes, «in liturgical readings it was intonation that mattered» (Clemoes 1952, 7). In this sense, Clemoes's paper on the relationship between punctuation and intonation in the liturgical prose of Late Old English and Early Middle English (Clemoes 1952) seems to reflect the author's teachings. However, this lesson presents a terminolo-

¹ This piece is bound in the same volume with 15th-century manuscript notes of Latin grammar, metrics, instructional poetry for children and other topics. In 8r-v there is also a brief tract on *distinctiones* attributed to John Leylond or Leland, a well-known 15th-century grammar teacher (on Leylond's treatise on punctuation, *cf.* Hunt 1980, 173). We are probably before a primer used by students who have left their artistic trace in form of figures depicting fish, fingers, teachers in declamatory pose and certain male organs which give a touch of freshness to these academic notes.

² In fact, the author considers himself a follower of Leylond, who is, according to him, the source of this tract (*cf.* 6 a reference to «Johannis» in footnote 9). On the elementary level of Leylond's work, *cf.* Hunt 1980, 173-4, 185; Copeland 1987, 147.

³ Line numbers make reference not only to our edition but also to the original text.

gical innovation regarding the names for the punctuation marks. The terms *coma*, *cola* and *periodus*, grouped under the generic name of *positurae* or *distinctiones*, were used in classical rhetoric to refer to the different parts of a speech and even to the pauses which followed them. This threefold pattern seems to correspond to the systems established in the treatises on *dictamen*, so popular in medieval times (Denholm-Young 1954, 77). Leylond's follower inherits these terms, but now they designate marks of punctuation: *coma* (.), *cola* (.,j) and *periodus* (.) (lines 6, 7 and 9). They take their name from the section of speech they follow, something which was unusual since «it was only in the sixteenth century that the words comma and colon came by extension to denote punctuation marks rather than parts of a sentence» (Denholm-Young 1954, 77).

Latin grammars and rhetorics usually associated punctuation with breath pauses. As Ong explains: «... these marks were designed primarily to meet the demands of oral reading or of declamation, and to meet them on a very practical level. They are breath marks, like the breath marks in musical scores» (Ong 1944, 350). The author of this brief tract also deals with pauses, but he does not claim explicitly that punctuation indicates breath marks. It seems, rather, that the reader must stop at his discretion wherever he considers more convenient, not for his breathing demands but for the hearers' understanding. This seems to contradict Blake's view, who considers pauses a help more for the reader than for the hearer: «... pauses were introduced at regular intervals to facilitate declamation or even chanting. They would assist oral performance rather than help elucidate the sense» (Blake 1977, 67).

Leylond's follower, on the other hand, is concerned with sense units. In fact, he conceives pauses as marks that frame them and do not interfere with the discourse fluency and meaning. He even warns that pauses made in incorrect locations may puzzle the hearers in two ways: they may link parts of the discourse which are unrelated, or they may separate parts of the discourse which are, indeed, related (lines 27-31).

Punctuation, then, does not mark breath pauses nor sense units. In this lesson «... pointing is intended as a guide to intonation. Such was the common function, in later medieval texts, of the notation of *distinctiones* ...» (Morgan 1952, 161). And here again the author focuses his attention on the hearer: reading is conceived as an act of aural perception, and not of visual perception. A similar idea is recorded in a study on the punctuation of Love's *Mirror*:

He [Love] anticipates both private reading and reading to others, addressing himself to 'every devoute creatour that loveth to rede or to here this book'. From these words alone, it might not be unreasonable to expect that punctuation, if provided by Love, would be designed to guide on either occasion (Zeeman 1956, 12)

Punctuation marks do indicate when the reader must modulate his voice. Besides, each mark indicates a type of intonation pattern. For instance, a comma indicates rising intonation (lines 2-3); a colon shows neutral intonation (line 3) and a period indicates falling intonation (lines 4-5). In addition, in lines 17-18, Leylond's follower points out that a question must be read with rising intonation on the final syllable of the last word. Thus, he follows the liturgical tradition which exerted an enormous influence on the correct reading of texts. Not in vain, eloquence and a good reading of religious works were among the skills a priest should cultivate:⁴

⁴ We must bear in mind that this lesson was addressed to future priests, as Leylond's follower reveals in line 37.

The liturgy made a continual demand throughout the Middle Ages for clear analysis and punctuation of a text. It also maintained an aural response to the written word, and helped to develop sensitivity to the clausal rhythms of the 'accentual' *cursus* which had gradually replaced the 'metrical' *cursus* of Antiquity. Developments in the punctuation associated with the liturgy were intended to assist the reader's comprehension and oral delivery of a text ... (Parkes 1992, 40)

According to Clemoes (1952, 12), the use of punctuation marks to indicate intonation patterns was gradually abandoned in England throughout the 15th century. However, humanists from other countries not only included a section devoted to the *positurae* or *distinctiones* in their grammatical tracts but also specified the intonation to be adopted at the end of different sections of the discourse.

Clemoes also claims that the *positurae* gained a new function in the new grammatical and logical analysis of discourse:

As *Artes Dictandi* increased in number, and Universities increased in importance, the centre of gravity shifted away from the liturgy. *Positurae* still appear, however, as elements of punctuation in MSS. of fourteenth- and fifteenth century English prose, adapting themselves to its increasingly logical structure (Clemon 1952, 19)

Nevertheless, it must be made clear that this reinterpretation of the *positurae* does not lead to a divorce between rhetoric and grammar. In fact, it is just the opposite; i.e., both attitudes merge: in the written medium, marks of punctuation indicate sense units which are uttered with a particular intonation in the discourse.

Although, as we have seen, Leyland's follower shows a special interest in intonation, he also devotes a brief section to word stress. The grammarian notes that every word has a main accent and warns against giving the same importance and emphasis to every syllable in the word. Therefore, one should avoid reading very slowly since this would lead to the misidentification of a word's stress pattern (lines 20-26).

It is quite clear that mastering the adequate intonation, and uttering the words with a particular emphasis is quite a difficult task when reading from a text at first sight. For this reason, the author recommends in lines 10-16 and in lines 39-40 that the reader should see the text beforehand or, at least, have the capacity to visually anticipate what would follow in the text. This recommendation had been given, though for different reasons, by classical authors who prescribed the careful preparation of a text before its public rendering (Parkes 1992, 10-1).

CONCLUSION

In this brief tract on reading aloud, the author shows an eclectic attitude: he follows classical theories on the *distinctiones*, adopts the rhetorical division of discourse, applies musical notions typical of the liturgy and, in addition, pays attention to the logical/grammatical structure of the discourse. From the classical tradition, he inherits the terms for naming the parts of a sentence: *coma*, *cola* and *periodus*; however, his use of such terms is slightly different from earlier uses. Now they name marks of punctuation rather than parts of a sentence.

The new tendency to mark off sense units is not reflected in his discussion on punctuation, but rather on his recommendation to keep together elements which are grammatically interdependent. In this way pause position depends on the grammatical structure of the text. This close relationship between punctuation, pauses and intonation patterns is re-

flected in the following quotation from the *Summa* of Conradus of Mure mentioned by Gradon in her study on the punctuation of a Middle English sermon:

Conradus of Mure says there are three kinds of pauses; *pausa suspensiva* in which the mind of the hearer is in suspense, which is to be pronounced with a rising intonation (*acuto accentu*) and which is to be punctuated with a point and a virgule above slanting from left to right; secondly, the *pausa constans* in which the mind of the hearer is not in suspense but, nevertheless, the sense is incomplete. It is to be pronounced with a level or falling intonation (*gravi accentu*) and is to be punctuated with a point and no virgule; *pausa finitiva* concludes the sentence and is to be pronounced *graviori accentu* and to be punctuated with a semi-colon. *cum puncto et uirgula inferius quasi curuo ductu a dextra in leuam.* (Gradon 1983, 40)

In short, the author's recommendations are not designed for the reader's comfort, but for the hearer's understanding. The reason for this is that the hearer's accurate understanding of the text does not depend on himself but rather on the reader's performance. The latter must take care of issues regarding voice modulation, pauses and syllable emphasis. Thus, this short tract sheds new light on the studies on punctuation and, additionally, it confirms the idea already stated by Salmon:

Early punctuation theory is also of relevance to contemporary linguists because it was largely—if not entirely—through the evolution of punctuation theory that insights into the suprasegmental features of English developed, and led to the present-day treatment of intonation and stress. (Salmon 1988, 287)

TEXT⁵

1. There byth iij punctis yn redyng Coma . cola
2. and *periodus* Coma hath o point . and euer ys rad
3. vpwarde Colon hath ij and ys rad playn .
4. *Periodus* ys yn the 3end of þ^e reson . and ys
5. put a doun . Vt in hac colecta. Nota *nostra*
6. *quanuis domine celesti pietate prosequere .j ecce colon*⁶
7. Vt et que agenda sunt videant, *ecce coma*
8. et adimplenda que viderunt *conualescant* .
9. *ecce periodus* et *terminat* sententia
10. A good reder shall hys eye a fore the worde
11. and than shall he rede well *yn de Magnique Dei Gratia*
12. Inprouisa legens vigili *percurrat* ocello
13. Que legit & *facilem* varia vice tollere *vocem*
14. *Alterno que* sono studeat *descendere* caute

⁵ Line numbers and layout follow the original. Abbreviations have been expanded and indicated by italics. Superior letters and underlining have been retained.

⁶ Parts underlined seem to represent the teacher's voice pointing at relevant elements in the explanation. In fact, they are textual deictics making reference either to the previous punctuation mark or to examples rarely recorded in the text which are probably provided in class.

15. Lector culpatur nisi leccio peruideatur
16. Et legitur lenius leccio visa prius
17. Eny interrogacion shalbe radde vpward yn þe
18. fynall syllabell of þe last worde . vt ibi
19. Quid exstis in desertum uidere?⁷ & cetera vide versus
20. Vox quesitor semper prestabit acutum .
21. accentum fini documentum superdabo tutum
- 22.⁸There nys but o accent yn o worde vide autor .
23. Catholic^{on} Vnius diccionis est principalis accentus lam
24. arguendi sunt qui nimis morose & traccim legunt
25. cuilibet fere silabe accentum reddentes vt momales
26. & earum sequentes
27. In al maner redyng pawse truly make than
28. no rest by twene þe adiettyf and hys sub
29. stantif . the nown and hys genetyf case
30. Noþer by twene the preposycion and hys case
31. Quia mala pausacio obsturat intellectum . Filius
32. hominis est semper filius virginis marie . In Saⁿcta scri^ptura
33. Vide Wyndosmenser in equiuocis . Quem dicunt
34. Homines esse filium hominis a marie . & homo equi^uocat vide versus
35. Christus Virgo Sathan non iniustus fragilis que
36. Est peccator homo simpliciter que notat
37. Ouer rede þy masse or þ^u say hym . Ne pecces
38. in accentu corripiendo produtta . vt aequ^e vide quemadmodum
39. Qui bene vult legere decet autem legenda videre
40. Nam legitur melius littera visa prius⁹

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⁷ Matt. 11.7.

⁸ Fol. 19r begins.

⁹ Exercises on Latin verses (fol. 19v) follow this piece, which ends in this way:

Exit origo rei memor esto Johannis
 semper amicus ei sis in amore dei
 Nomen scrⁱptoris qui legitur precibus rogo Noris
 [Explicit]
 et laus deo

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