

death of “la belle Aude” has not nineteen but eighteen end words, and these do not include all five of those Adams mentions.

His first example from this source, “Il pleut [sic] des yeux” (literally, “It rains from his eyes”) is presumably meant to be “Il pleure des yeux” (“He cries from his eyes”), since the Old French is “Pluret des oilz” (l. 3,712 in Bédier’s edition). However, neither the modern French nor the Old French expression actually assonates. First, *pleure* has an open *æ*, *yeux* a close *æ* (“subassonance,” if we will). Second, the likely phonetic transcription of the ca. 1100 Old French, based on study of the epic’s endwords (e.g., *oilz* in l. 3,629), is [plúræ des wǣwts]—so no assonance at all!

Other examples, though, could be used to demonstrate the point that internal assonance is significant in the *Chanson de Roland*. Just seven verses later, we find:

Après Rollant que jo vive remaigne! (l. 3,719),

with assonance between the caesura word and end word (*ai* and *ā* assonate in *Roland*, as in the end words of this very *laisse*).

Adams’ other example is “le *grand Roland*.” This phrase, however, must be taken from a modern translation, since it does not occur in any line or variant of this *laisse*.

In the four lines quoted from Heine, it might be more exact to see examples of “subassonance” in *Brust* and *Glut* (open and close *u*, respectively), *Wo* and *holde* (close and open *o*), and *Lampe* and *Lager* (front and back *a*); still, even these incomplete “vowel echoes” certainly deserve comment. (A host of examples from other German poets will be found in Robert P. Newton’s subtle and methodical article “The First Voice: Vowel Configuration in the German Lyric,” *JEGP*, 68, Oct. 1969, 565–92.)

Despite these few imprecisions—doubtless hard to avoid in crossing the bounds of our traditional “fields”—this was a fine and stimulating article, and I hope an advance sample of the cross-disciplinary studies that *PMLA*’s “new editorial policy” may bring us.

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To the Editor:

Percy G. Adams’ recent article, “The Historical Importance of Assonance to Poets,” contains far too many errors and questionable assumptions. His definition of assonance, “the repetition of a stressed vowel, but not of a following consonant . . .” (p. 8), doesn’t

mention “diphthongs,” which differ significantly from simple vowels, and yet he finds assonance (p. 10) in line 248 of *Beowulf*: “*eorla ofer eorþan, thonne is ēower sum.*” Also, he makes no distinction here between *eo*, [εo], or [εə], and *ēo*, [e:ɔ], or [e:ə], diphthongs which differ both quantitatively and qualitatively. When (p. 11) he quotes line 459 from *Beowulf*, “*Geslōh thīn fæder fæthe mæste,*” he equates the vowels *ǣ* [æ] and *ē* [æ:], making no quantitative distinction, even though such a distinction in the earlier periods of the language was phonemic. (*Fæthe*, according to the Klaeber edition, should read *fæhthe*.) Adams also finds assonance (p. 11) in the phrase “*forgytheth ond forgymeth*” (*forgymeth*, in Klaeber), thus equating *ȳ*[i] and *ȳ*[i:].

Adams errs (p. 11) when he states that stressed “[o]” occurs six times in the lines from *Sir Gawain*, “*The bores hed watz borne before the burnes selven / That him forferde in the forthe thurz forse of his honde so stronge.*” The *o*’s italicized are either long open *ō* [ɔ:], *bores*, *borne* (perhaps [ɔ]), or short *ǒ*[ɔ], before, *forferde*, *forthe*, *forse*. (Although the *o*’s are not italicized in *honde* and *stronge*, they also represent stressed [ɔ] and could be used to strengthen the thesis of the article.) The fact that Adams cites [ɔ] elsewhere in reference to Shakespeare (p. 14) would indicate that he considers [ɔ] and [o] to be different sounds (as indeed they are), so that the error here is underscored. I am also puzzled about why he italicizes the *r*’s after the *o*’s in these lines, since his definition of assonance specifically rules out the repetition of a following consonant. Similar instances occur later (p. 15) when Chaucer’s “*yerde smerte*” and “*poudre-marchant tart*” and Shakespeare’s “*porportion’d course*” are cited. These examples are confusing also in light of the statement immediately preceding which apparently refers to them as examples of “single phoneme echoes.” Surely the *r* is a separate phoneme. Other examples occur when James Thomson’s “*cheartful error*” (p. 13) and the *Beowulf* poet’s “*worda ond worca*” (p. 11) are cited. (Incidentally, both Day-Serjeantson and Davis give *worch* instead of Adams’ *worche*, p. 11, in line 2,096 of *Sir Gawain*.)

Nor is Adams out of trouble when he considers the Early Modern English poets. The diphthong in words like *I* and *die*, continually referred to as [ai], should probably be something more like [əi]. At any rate, in the three lines quoted from Book Two of *The Faerie Queene* (p. 12) I count only *eight* stressed [əi]’s, and look in vain for the *nine* referred to. Again, when the author quotes the lines from Spenser (p. 12), “*And fayre Philotime she rightly hight, / The fairest wight that wonneth under skye,*” he (the printer?) neglects to point out the most outstanding use of assonance, namely “*fayre / fairest,*” the stressed vowels being [ɛ:]. Adams’ treatment, or lack of treatment, of the

EMnE long open \bar{e} [ɛ:] results in several significant errors. Thus, he quotes the line from *Hamlet* (p. 12), “This heavy-headed revel east and west,” and says that stressed “[ɛ]” occurs five times, failing to distinguish between the [ɛ:] of *east* and the [ɛ] of the other four vowels. If he considers *east* here to have a short [ɛ], I wonder why he doesn’t consider *seals* to have the same short sound—it, too, is a long vowel, of course—in another Shakespearean line in the same paragraph, “Death’s second self, that seals up all in rest.”

Elsewhere (p. 16), Adams correctly identifies the assonating sound of Shakespeare’s “fever” and “sleeps” as [i], although [i:] would be more accurate, but in the line, “Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep” (p. 16), he fails to distinguish between the [i:] of “we” and “sleep” and the [ɛ:] of “eat” and “meal”—a very serious error, since [i:] and [ɛ:] are quite dissimilar. Adams says that all these sounds are “[i].” With the errors straightened out, interesting points about assonance in this line could be made, but not the one made in the article. And it should be mentioned that although Adams does not single out the word “fear” in this line, it contains the stressed sound [ɛ:], making the line even more extraordinary in its display of assonance than he realizes. When Adams speaks of “the two vowel echoes” in Lady Macbeth’s doctor’s line, “My mind she has mated and amaz’d my sight” (p. 13), and calls them “pleasing to the ear,” shouldn’t he tell us what the “pleasing” sounds are (i.e., [ɔɪ] and [ɛ:]) so that we can judge for ourselves? (Incidentally, in the lines quoted from James Thomson, p. 13, why aren’t *ray* and *away* cited as examples of stressed [e] assonance? Why isn’t *sweetness* cited in these lines along with the other [i] sounds? And how is Poe’s “sibyllic splendor,” p. 15, an example of assonance?)

Is the author really serious when he says (p. 11), “the high proportion of lines in *Beowulf* that have vowel echoes in the stressed syllables is especially unexpected when one considers that the poet had to give his primary attention to finding words that would alliterate”? If the purpose of the alliteration is, as Adams says (p. 10), to emphasize the “accents,” then wouldn’t the use of assonated stressed syllables further call attention to them? Adams goes on to observe correctly that in Old English the initial vowels that “alliterate” with one another are seldom identical, whereas in Middle English they are identical; he concludes from this fact (p. 11), however, that the Middle English poets “were turning to the greater ear appeal of true assonance in initial positions.” Can one so glibly assume that Old English poetry composed for recitation from memory had less “ear appeal” than later Middle English poetry?

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Mr. Adams replies:

Thank you for printing these two criticisms of my piece on assonance. One of them added information we all need. In fact, I hope that Smith’s study of sound effects in early French and Provençal poetry will be published, and if his dissertation had been completed—or the article he mentions from *JEGP*—when my own essay was long ago accepted by *PMLA*, I am sure that I would have profited from reading them: he and many others can, of course, teach me much about Old and Middle French. What he has proved best in his letter, however, is the great importance of a scholar’s text, and no scholar should be more concerned with his text than one who works with the sounds of words, especially sounds in early periods. I confess to having used a modernized version of *La Chanson de Roland*, a version modified from Bédier by Frederick Anderson, who unlike Bédier, retains the end assonance of the original even though in a simplified form. In the interests of saving space in my explanation, I turned from an early text, such as the Digby MS. in the Bodleian, edited by Gardner, Hilton, and Woods in 1950, because to describe the end assonance in that text is a most complicated job, one Smith can do far better than I. To be brief, that text, surely the cleanest we have, does echo one stressed vowel in the end words of each laisse. But there are two important facts to be noted—I hope Mr. Smith will agree—one, that the vowels of the stressed end syllables sometimes do not provide a perfect echo; and two, although the syllable of the stressed vowel is usually the final syllable, it is often followed by an unstressed syllable, the final unstressed syllables in a laisse being as nearly identical as the poet, or bard, could make them. To illustrate, in the Digby stanza 253, one of the shortest, the end words are “chevalchet”—“damage”—“reguardet”—“vertudable”—“halte”—“dessaffret”—“halne”—“altres.” Here the poet employed *a* in the stressed syllable of each word, but a reader may well wonder if the *a* of “reguardet” is exactly of the same quality as that of the other end words. And it is interesting to see that three of the unstressed final syllables end in *-et*. The modernized version I no doubt unwisely selected—and it *does* have nineteen lines—permitted me to be brief, but it also left me exposed to specialists such as Mr. Smith, who is absolutely right in calling my hand. He is also helpful in pointing to l. 3,719 as assonating “Rollant” and “remaigne” although l. 3,709, the one Anderson changed to include “le grand Roland,” does assonate “Rollanz” with “chataine,” just as the next line has “jurat” and the end word “prendre,” the nasalized vowel of which was not, I feel sure, sounded exactly as were all the other stressed end vowels of the laisse, “sale” and “parler,” for example. This regular “end” assonance followed by a kind of “feminine” assonance