Ling 103

Practice with reading Chaucer

The following pages contain lines 445-476 of Chaucer’s General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (description of the Wife of Bath), taken from the four oldest major manuscripts which are usually used as the basis of modern editions (Ellesmere, Hengwrt, Cambridge and Petworth manuscripts).

Where / appears it indicates a line break in the manuscript where there is no line break in the poem. The letter þ represents ‘th’ and the letter û represents modern ‘y’. Sometimes ‘u’ represents modern ‘v’ and vice-versa; ‘i’ may substitute for modern ‘j’.

The following words all have stress on the first syllable and end in a schwa syllable scáthe, hádde, shólde, díde, álle, fýne, wéren, dórste, swére, hósen, stréite, shóes, móyste, néwe, héwe, lýve, chírche, dóre, fýve, yóuthe, spéke, nówthe, thríes, Róme, Jáme, kóude, wéye, séye, tárge, hípes, lárge, páire, spóres, shárpe, láughe, cárpe, lóve, chánce, ólde, dáunce

1. Determine where stresses appear on the remaining polysyllabic content words, paying careful attention to cases involving retraction. Try to figure out which vowels were long and which were short. Try to find each word (except the place names) in the on-line Middle English dictionary (Note: some will be difficult to locate; remember the y may substitute for i).

makyng  (= ModE making, from ME verb maken ‘to make’)
Ypres
parisshe
offrynge
certeyn
charitee
coverchiefs
weyeden  (= ModE (they) weighed)
sunday
scarlet
y-teid  (y- is a stressless prefix added to past participles)
worthy
womman
housbondes
oother
compaignye
nedeth (= ModE needs, archaic needeth)
Jerusalem
muchel
wandrynge (= ModE wandering)
tothed (= ModE -toothed)
soothly
amblere
esily
y-wympled (y- is a stressless prefix added to past participles)
bokeler
mantel
felaweshipe
remedies

2. Identify all schwas (short e vowels) which are discounted for the meter.

3. Make sure you understand how each line is matched to the iambic pattern.

4. Compare the four manuscripts. Which manuscript is the easiest to read? Which has the most logical system of spelling?

5. In the Petworth manuscript the editor has added some letters (in brackets). Why?
A good wif was ther of biside Bathe
But she was som del deef and þat was scathe
Of clooth makyng she hadde swich an haunt
She passed hem of ypres and of Gaunt
In al the parisshe / wif ne was ther noo
That to the offrynge / bifore hire sholde goon
And if ther dide / certeyn so wrooth was she
That she was / out of alle charitee
Hir couerchiefs / ful fyne weren of ground
I dorste swere / they weyeden ten pound
That on a sonday / weren vpon hir heed
Hir hosen weren / of fyn scarlet reed
fful streite yteyd / and shoes ful moyste and newe
Boold was hir face / and fair and reed of hewe
She was a worthy womman al hir lyue
Housbondes at chirche dore / she hadde fyue
Withouten oother compaignye in youthe
But ther of / nedeth nat to speke as nowthe
And thries / hadde she been at Ierusalem
She hadde passed / many a straunge strem
At Rome she had been and at Boloigne
In Galice at Seint Iame / and at Coloigne
She koude muchel / of wandrynge by the weye
Gat tothed was she / soothly for to seye
Vp on an Amblere / esily she sat
Ywympled wel / and on hir heed an hat
As brood / as is a bokeler / or a targe
A foot mantel / aboute hir hipes large
And on hire feet a paire of spores sharpe
In felaweshipe / wel koude she laughe and carpe
Of remedies of loue / she knew per chaunce
For she koude of that Art the olde daunce
Hengwrt manuscript

A good wyf was ther / of bisyde Bathe
But she was som del deef and that was scathe
Of clooth makynge / she hadde swich an haunt
She passed hem / of Ipres / and of Gaunt
In al the parysshe / wyf ne was ther noon
That to the offrynge / bifore hire sholde goon
And if ther dide / certeyn / so wrooth was shee
That she was / out of alle charitee
Hir Couerchiefes / ful fyne weere of grownd
I dorste swere / they weyeden ten pownd
That on a Sonday / weeren vp on hir heed
Hir hosen weeren / of fyn Scarlet reed
fful streyte yteyd / and shoes / ful moyste & newe
Boold was hir face / and fair and reed of hewe
She was a worthy womman / al hir lyue
Housbondes at chirche dore / she hadde fyue
With outen oother compaignye / in yowthe
But ther of / nedeth noght to speke as nowthe
And thries / hadde she been at Ierusalem
She hadde passed / many a straunge strem
At Rome she hadde been / and at Bolyyne
In Galyce at Seint Iame / and at Coloyne
She koude muchel / of wandrynge by the weye
Gattothed was she / soothly for to seye
Vp on an Amblere / esily she sat
Ywympled wel / and on hir heed an hat
As brood as is / a Bokeler / or a Targe
A foot mantel / aboute hir hypes large
And on hir feet a peyre of spores sharpe
In felaweshipe / wel koude she laughe. and carpe
Of remedies of loue / she knew par chaunce
ffor she koude of that art the olde daunce
A good wif was there of beside bathe
But sche was sumdel def & þat was skathe
Of cloth makyng sche hade swich an hand
Sche passed hem of ypres & of gaunt
In al the parich wif was there non
That to the offerynge to fore her schulde gon
And ȝif þere dede serteyn so wroth was sche
That sche was out of alle charite
Here couercheis ful fyne were of ground
I durste swere þey weyedyn a pound
That on a sunday weryn vp on here hed
Here hosyn weryn of fyn skarlet red
fful streyte I-teyede & schois ful moyste & newe
Bold was here face & fayr & red of hewe
Sche was a worthi woman al here lyue
Husbondis at cherche dore sche hadde fyue
With-outyn opere compayne in ȝouthe
But þerof nedith not to speke as nouthe
And thryes hadde sche ben at Ierusalem
Sche hadde passed manye a strong strem
At rome she hadde ben & at boloyne
In galis at seynt Iame & at coloyne
Sche couthe meche of wonderyng be þe weye
Gat-toped was sche sothly for to seye
Vp-on an aumbelere ful esily sche sat
I-wympeled wel & on here hed an hat
As brod as is a bokeler or a targe
A fot-mental a-boute here hepis large
And on here fet a peyre of sporys scharpe
In felauschepe wel coude sche lawe & carpe
Of remedijis of loue / sche knew per schaunce
ffor sche coude of that art / the olde daunse
A Good wiff ther was of besides bathe
But she was somdel def and þat was scathe
Of cloth makynge sche hadde such an haunt
She passid hem of ypres and of Gaunt
In alle the parisch wif ne was ther noon
That to the ofrýnge toforn hir shulde goon
And yf ther died / certeyn wroth was she
That she was out of al[le] charite
Hir couerchefes ful fyne were of ground
I durste swere they weyeden ten pound
That on a Sonday weren vpon hire hede
Hir hosen weren of fyne scarlet rede
fful streight I-teied / and shoes ful moist and newe
Bold was hir face and faire / and red of hiewe
She was a worthi womman al hir lyue
Housbondes atte chirche dore she hadde fyue
With outen othir companie in youthe
But ther of nedith nouht to speke as nouthe
And thries hadde she bene at Ierusalem
She here passed many a strange strem
At Rome sche had ben / and at boloyne
In Galice at saint Iame and at Coloigne
She koude moche on wandrynge bi the weye
Gat tothid was she sothely for to seie
Vp on an Amblere esily she satte
I-wympled wel and on hir heed an hatte
As brood as is a bokellere or a targe
A fot mantel abouten hire hipes large
And on hire feet a paire of spores sharpe
In felaschipe wel couthe sche lawhe and carpe
Of remedies of loue she kneuh parchaunce
ffor she couthe of that art the daunce