Linguistics 103
Chaucer's Poetry

Chaucer's verse is written in Middle English which differs from Modern English in a number of respects. Two differences that will be relevant are:

1. Pronunciation of Vowels

• There are no ‘silent letters’

  Where there is a ‘silent’ e in Modern English, this was a vowel in Middle English, pronounced as a schwa /ə/ (the sound ‘uh’ in, for example, the last syllable of America)

• Long vowels vs. short vowels.
  The difference between long and short vowels is important for the rules of stress placement, discussed below under 2.

• Diphthongs
  Sequences of two (different) vowels which combine to form the vocalic part of a syllable.

Long vowels or diphthongs
A vowel letter followed by another vowel letter or by w or y usually represents a long vowel or a diphthong:

    aa, ee, ea, oo, oi, ou, eu, ai, ei
    ow, oy, ew, ey, uw, aw, ay
    u (when at the end of a word)
    ogh

Any vowel when written single can be either long or short, depending on what follows.

• Much of the time if a vowel is followed by one consonant and then a vowel it is long.

    nāme, grēne, shīres, bōte, hōlī, rīden

• Otherwise a vowel written single is short:

    ān, thāt, tēndrē, ōft, būt, fōlk, yōng
In most cases if the vowel is ‘long’ or a diphthong in Modern English, it was long or a diphthong in Middle English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MidEng</th>
<th>pronounced</th>
<th>spelling</th>
<th>ModEng</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rīden</td>
<td>&quot;reed-un&quot;</td>
<td>i, y</td>
<td>ride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grēne</td>
<td>&quot;gray-nuh&quot;</td>
<td>e, ee</td>
<td>green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nāme</td>
<td>&quot;nah-muh&quot;</td>
<td>a, aa</td>
<td>name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hōly</td>
<td>&quot;haw-lee&quot;</td>
<td>o, oo</td>
<td>holy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vertū</td>
<td>&quot;vair-tū&quot;</td>
<td>u, eu, ew, uw</td>
<td>virtue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fowles</td>
<td>&quot;fool-uhs&quot;</td>
<td>ou, ow, ogh</td>
<td>fowls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cause</td>
<td>&quot;cow-zuh&quot;</td>
<td>au, aw</td>
<td>cause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newe</td>
<td>&quot;nyoo-uh&quot;</td>
<td>eu, ew</td>
<td>new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fewe</td>
<td>&quot;feh-oo-uh&quot;</td>
<td>ew</td>
<td>few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coy</td>
<td>&quot;coy&quot;</td>
<td>oi, oy</td>
<td>coy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>day</td>
<td>&quot;die&quot;</td>
<td>ay, ai</td>
<td>day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grown</td>
<td>&quot;graw-un&quot;</td>
<td>ou, ow</td>
<td>grow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The /ü/ sound, as in vertū ‘virtue’, usually appeared in words of French origin. Otherwise ew was usually /ju:/ or /ɛʊ/.

Note that there has been a shift in the pronunciation of the long vowels (and some diphthongs) since Middle English. This change, known as the Great Vowel Shift, occurred during the early 16th century.

i > /ai/        ride
ē > /i:/        green
ā > /eɪ/       name
ō > /oʊ/       holy
ū > /au/       fowls
/ai/ → /eɪ/    day
/oo/ → /oʊ/    grow

The spellings ou, ow were ambiguous. Sometimes they represented /u:/ as in fowles /fu:ləz/, and sometimes /oʊ/ as in grown /ɡrɔʊn/. 
2. Location of Stress
The location of stress in polysyllabic words may differ from that in Modern English.

Three properties of syllables determine the location of stress.

1. The length of the vowel

2. The ‘weight’ of the syllable:
   - **Heavy syllables**: syllables which contain
     - a long vowel or diphthong
     - any vowel followed by two or more consonants

   - **Light syllables**:
     - all others =
     - short vowels followed by a single consonant
     - short vowels at the end of a word

3. The position of the syllable:
   - **final, second-to-last, third-to-last**

Basic Middle English Stress Rule

1. If the last syllable is long or contains a diphthong, stress falls there.

   *licóur, vertú, nathélées, aldáy*

   (But adjectives ending in *-y* and *-ous* are not stressed on the final syllable: *sély, wórthy*)

   Otherwise,

2. a. If the second-to-last syllable is **heavy**, stress falls there.

   *natúre, sóote, róote, shówres, shówres, Ápril, pérced, engéndred*
   - long V/ diphthong
   - vowel plus CC

   b. If there are only two syllables, stress falls on the second-to-last (provided condition 1 is not met)

   *éver, sély*
Otherwise,

3. Stress falls on the third-to-last syllable.

évĕrĕ, Zéphĕrūs, hŏrrible, pārdoner

A number of words stressed by rules (1) and (2a) have stress in a different place than in the Modern English word that developed from them. These pronunciations eventually changed for many words, placing stress earlier in the word. In Chaucer's time this change appeared to be underway.

In a disyllabic word stressed on the last syllable, or in a word of three or more syllables ending in schwa (stressless e), stress can be retracted one syllable. This gives rise to stress doublets in which two stresses were possible:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{licoúr} & \sim \text{ lícour} & \text{Romáuns} & \sim \text{ Rómauns} \\
\text{fortúne} & \sim \text{ fórtúne} & \text{goodnéssé} & \sim \text{ góodnesse}
\end{align*}
\]
3. Pronunciation of Consonants

For the most part the consonants were pronounced as in modern English. Some exceptions:

- **gh**: unless part of the diphthong ogh, gh was still pronounced as /x/ (the German ch sound)
  
  *knight, night, boughte*

- **s**: usually pronounced /z/ when between vowels

Double consonants were pronounced long

- **cch**: is a long instance of ch

- **y**: is frequently a vowel, spelled i in modern English
  
  *thynge*
Peculiarities of Chaucer's verse.

There is considerably more syncope and elision in Chaucer than in Shakespeare. One peculiarity is that elision can occur across [h] (as well as across vowels):

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).}
\end{array}
\]

And éveré_honoûred for his worthinésse

Sometimes, as above, the [h] is no longer pronounced in modern English, but this is not always the case and moreover it is likely that all such instances of [h] were pronounced in Chaucer's time.

C1. A schwa vowel (spelled -e) is optionally ignored for the meter. Whether this means that it was not pronounced in this context, or simply not counted for the meter, is unclear. Ordinarily vowels which were pronounced schwa in Middle English are spelled e and correspond to ‘silent’ e in Modern English spelling.

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).}
\end{array}
\]

This ilke worthý Knight hadde been also

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).}
\end{array}
\]

He slepte namôre than dooth a nightingâle

C2. An unstressed monosyllabic word can be combined into a single position with a preceding syllable.

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).}
\end{array}
\]

Thow hast translâted the Rómauns of the Rôse LGW.225

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).}
\end{array}
\]

In many plâces were nyghtyngâles RR.657 (tetrameter)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).}
\end{array}
\]

As wel of this as of öther thynges moore D.WB.584

Stress clashes allow a stressed syllable to occupy a weak position:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{x x) x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).}
\end{array}
\]

A wýs wómman wol bisye hire evere in oon
Examples of the variability in stressing of words with final heavy syllables.

\textit{goodness(e) vs. goodness(e) and fortune vs. f\textordmasculine{}r\textordmasculine{}ne}

\textit{goodness(e)}

\begin{verbatim}
  x x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x) .
\end{verbatim}

Prowesse of man, for god, of his goodnesse

--- Wife of Bath's Tale

\begin{verbatim}
  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)
\end{verbatim}

Man gruccheth of goodnesse that hymself

--- Parson's Tale

\textit{goodness(e)}

\begin{verbatim}
  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)
\end{verbatim}

With mercy, goodnesse, and with swich pitee

--- Second Nun's Prologue

\textit{f\textordmasculine{}r\textordmasculine{}tune}

\begin{verbatim}
  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)
\end{verbatim}

The strook of f\textordmasculine{}r\textordmasculine{}tune or of avent\textordmasculine{}re.

--- The Clerk's Tale

\textit{fort\textordmasculine{}une}

\begin{verbatim}
  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)  x  x)
\end{verbatim}

Wel hath fort\textordmasculine{}une yt\textordmasculine{}rned thee the d\textordmasculine{}ys,

--- Knight's Tale
Example scansion of Chaucerian verse:
(beginning of the Pardoner's Prologue)

Oure Höste gan tō swēre as hē wēre wood
crazy

"Harrow," quod hē, bŷ nailes and bŷ blood
help

This was a fals cherl and a fals justice

As shāmeful deeth as herte may devise

Cōm(e) tō thīs(e) jūges and hir advocāts

Al-gāt(e) this sēly maide is slain, allās!
at any rate innocent

Allās, too dēre boughte she beauțee!

Wherfore I saye alday that men may see

The yiftes of Fortūne and of Nature

Been cause of deeth to mány a crē-a-tūre.

As bōthe yiftes that I spēke of now,

Men han ful ofte more for harm than prow.
benefit

But trewely, mŷn owene maister dēre
This is a pitous tāle for to heere.

But nāthelees, passe ūver, is no fors:

I pray(e) to God so sāve thy gentil cors body