

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, hōlȳ, rȳden

- Otherwise a vowel written single is short:

ǎn, thăt, tēndrĕ, ȝft, bŭt, 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.

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

The /ü/ sound, as in *vertu* 'virtue', usually appeared in words of French origin. Otherwise *ew* was usually /ju:./ or /εʊ/.

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.

\bar{i}	>	/aɪ/	ride
\bar{e}	>	/i:/	green
\bar{a}	>	/eɪ/	name
\bar{o}	>	/oʊ/	holy
\bar{u}	>	/aʊ/	fowls
/aɪ/	→	/eɪ/	day
/ɔʊ/	→	/oʊ/	grow

The spellings *ou*, *ow* were ambiguous. Sometimes they represented /u:/ as in *fowles* /fu:ləz/, and sometimes /ɔʊ/ as in *growen* /grɔʊən/.

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.

licoúr, vertú, nathelées, 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.

<i>natûre, sóote, róote, shówres</i>	long V/ diphthong
<i>Ápril, pérced, engéndred</i>	vowel plus CC

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

évěr, sély

Otherwise,

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

évěřě, Zéphĩrũs, hórrible, párdoner

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:

licoúr ~ lícour *Romáuns ~ Rómauns*

fortúne ~ fórtune *goodnésse ~ góodnesse*

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

thyng

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):

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).
And évere honoured 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.

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).
This ilke worthy Knight hadde been also

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).
He slepte namōre than dooth a nightingāle

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

x x) x x)x x) x x) x x)x
Thow hast translāted the Rómauns of the Rōse LGW.225

x x)x x) x x) x x).
In many plāces were nyghtyngāles RR.657
(tetrameter)

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).
As wel of this as of ōther thynges moore D.WB.584

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

x x) x x) x x)x x) x x) x x)
A wys wómman wol bisye hire evere in oon

Examples of the variability in stressing of words with final heavy syllables.

goodnéss(e) vs. góodness(e) and fortúne vs. fórtune

goodnéss(e)

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x) .
 Prowesse of man, for god, of his goodnésse
 — Wife of Bath's Tale

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x)
 Man gruccheth of goodnésse that hymself
 — Parson's Tale

góodness(e)

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x)
 With mercy, góodnesse, and with swich pitee
 — Second Nun's Prologue

fórtune

x x) x x) x x) x x)x x).
 The strook of fórtune or of aventúre.
 — The Clerk's Tale

fortúne

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x)
 Wel hath fortúne ytúrned thee the dȳs,
 - Knight's Tale

Example scansion of Chaucerian verse:

(beginning of the Pardoner's Prologue)

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x)
 Oure Hōste gan tō swēre as hē wēre wood *crazy*

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x)
 "Harrow," quod hē, bȳ nailes and bȳ blood *help*

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).
 This was a fals cherl and a fals justice

x x) x x) x x)x x) x x).
 As shāmeiful deeth as herte may devise

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

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

x x) x x)x x) x x) x x)
Allās, too dēre boughte she beautee!

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x)
 Wherfore I saye alday that men may see

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x).
 The yiftes of Fortūne and of Natūre

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

x x)x x) x x) x x) x x)
 As bōthe yiftes that I spēke of now,

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x)
 Men han ful ofte more for harm than prow. *benefit*

x x)x x) x x)x x) x x).
 But trewely, mȳn owene maister dēre

x x) x x)x x)x x) x x).
 This is a pítous tāle for to heere.

x x)x x) x x)x x) x x)
 But nāthelees, passe ōver, is no fors:

x x) x x) x x) x x) x x)
 I pray(e) to God so sāve thȳ gentil cors *body*