THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

Geoffrey Chaucer

A Reader-Friendly Edition

The Original Middle English Words

in

Modern Spelling

Edited by

Michael Murphy
This edition of Geoffrey Chaucer’s CANTERBURY TALES is copyright. The base text is the Hengwrt Manuscript as printed in A Six Text Print of the Canterbury Tales edited by F.J. Furnival for the Chaucer Society (London, 1868 onwards; rept 1967), with readings sometimes taken from other MSS in the Six Text, especially Ellesmere, and occasionally from variants recorded in The Text of the Canterbury Tales edited by J.M. Manly and Edith Rickert, 8 vols, Chicago: U of Chicago, 1940). The Variorum Edition from the University of Oklahoma and other scholarly editions were also consulted.


Audioglosses of the General Prologue and of some Tales can be found on this site. These provide explanatory glosses for unfamiliar words through the ear rather than the eye like conventional glosses.

Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde in two versions (abbreviated and unabbreviated), and its medieval sequel: Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid, as well as poems by Gavin Douglas and Dunbar are also to be found on this site, and may be freely used for personal or academic purposes.

At least one edition of the Tales in Middle English spelling is available on the Internet through Labyrinth.

Also available from Conal and Gavin:
Canterbury Marriage Tales (ISBN 0-9679557-1-8) which has part of the General Prologue and all of the tales of the Wife, the Clerk, the Merchant and the Franklin.

Canterbury Quintet (ISBN 1-893385-02-7): General Prologue, and the Tales of the Miller, the Wife, the Pardoner and the Nun’s Priest.

To my family
in gratitude and love
Introductory Note

to

Canterbury Tales

This edition of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales is NOT a translation. It has Chaucer’s original language word for word, with only the spelling modified, as in editions of Shakespeare. “Note on How the Text may be Read” and “The Language of This Edition” have further comments about this on a later page.”

This is an edition in modern spelling of Tales told by the pilgrims on that famous fictional journey to Canterbury somewhere in the 1390’s, to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket, who had been martyred there in the year 1170. Also included is the General Prologue, an opening section in which the poet describes the Pilgrims and their agreement to tell the tales along the road to Canterbury.

The people in this varied group tell an equally varied selection of tales, some of them in verse, some in prose. There are tales solemn and comic, religious and bawdy; romance, moral exemplum, beast fable, parody. “God’s plenty” the poet Dryden called it.

This is an accessible edition, in the original words, of Chaucer’s great work, one of the most famous writings in English literature. It has most of the necessary aids right on the page. Those who need more can consult the Audiogloss of several tales on this site.

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1 For a full development of the argument see the articles now on the Internet in the Essays section on this site: "On Not Reading Chaucer – Aloud," originally published in Mediaevalia 9 (1986 for 1983), 205-224 and "On Editing a New Edition of the Canterbury Tales in Modern Spelling," published in Chaucer Review 26 (1991), 48-64. I have since modified my views enough to restore the "pronounced e ’s" in most words in this edition.
BRIEF LIFE OF CHAUCER

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340's. His father, a prosperous wine merchant, had enough money to provide his son with an education that grounded him solidly in French and Latin, and enough influence to have the boy taken into an aristocratic household for another kind of education that would later fit him for diplomatic, court and public service. The early part of this training he got in the house of Lionel, one of the sons of King Edward III. At the end of that phase of his education, he went to France on one of the military campaigns of the Hundred Years War, but was captured. He was important enough to be ransomed by the king, but not as important as Sir John of Beverley's horse for which the king paid more ransom money than he did for Geoffrey. Some amused remarks have been made by modern students of Chaucer about the king's sense of priorities, but as Professor Lounsbury said while horses were still a functioning part of American life, there has never been a period in the history of our race when the average man could bring the price of a good horse. That still means that the king thought Geoffrey Chaucer was an average man. How unperceptive, we think.

After his rather inglorious military debut, Geoffrey may have been for a year or two a student at one of the Inns of Court, schools which prepared men for careers in law and administration. He married Philippa Roet (or Pan), a woman who had probably served in the household of Lionel and his wife Elizabeth. Philippa's sister was first the mistress and later the wife of John of Gaunt, another son of Edward III, and one of the most powerful men in the land. Already Geoffrey was well connected. In the 1360's Chaucer served on missions abroad for the king several times. In the early 1370's he visited Italy for the first time on a trade mission, and again in 1378. During these trips he made acquaintance with the work of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, all of whom influenced him profoundly.

In the meantime, in 1374 he had been appointed Controller of the Customs in wool, skins and hides at the Port of London, probably both a demanding and remunerative post, and when he was appointed Controller of the Petty Customs on wines in 1382, he no doubt had more work and more money. These posts he kept until about 1386, when he seems to have lost them through a "change in administration." They were real jobs, and not sinecures. How he wrote as much as he did while travelling on diplomatic missions or working full time on the docks is something of a
mystery. He himself lifts the veil just a tiny bit in a passage spoken by the Eagle to Geoffrey in his poem The House of Fame:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Thou hearest neither that nor this.} \\
&\text{For when thy labor done all is,} \\
&\text{And hast made all thy reckonings,} \\
&\text{Instead of rest and new things} \\
&\text{Thou gost home to thy house anon,} \\
&\text{And all as dumb as any stone} \\
&\text{Thou sittest at another book} \\
&\text{Till fully dazèd is thy look.}
\end{align*}
\]

For a man whose reading and writing were done in large part after his day's work, he produced a prodigious body of poetry of the very first rank.

For one year in 1386 he was even a Member of Parliament for Kent. From 1389-91 he was Clerk of the King's Works, in charge of maintaining some of the major royal buildings under the new king, Richard II. In the rest of the decade of the 1390's he does not seem to have had any official position, and there is some evidence that he was in serious debt. One such piece of evidence is a charming "begging poem" that he wrote “To His Purse”, and directed to King Henry IV who had seized power from Richard II:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{To you, my purse, and to no other wight} \\
&\text{Complain I, for you be my lady dear.} \\
&\text{I am so sorry now that you be light} \\
&\text{Me were as lief be laid upon my bier,} \\
&\text{For which unto your mercy thus I cry:} \\
&\text{Be heavy again or else must I die.}
\end{align*}
\]

And so on for three stanzas ending with a direct plea to the King:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{O conqueror of Brute's Albion . . .} \\
&\text{(Britain)} \\
&\text{Have mind upon my supplication}
\end{align*}
\]

He died in 1400, and was buried in Westminster Abbey, the first occupant of Poet's Corner.

Chaucer lived during trying and sometimes stirring years, and yet one hears very little of this in his poetry. He was a small boy when the Black Death struck for the first time in 1348, one of the most fearful calamities of the Middle Ages. In several visitations the bubonic plague wiped out at least one third of the population of England, striking quite democratically at all ranks of society. It must have left powerful memories, or at least yielded powerful narratives from his
elders, yet there is hardly a reference to this traumatic event in his work. Partly as the result of the shortage of labor produced by the Black Death, the peasantry became rather more demanding. Repressive legislation produced only rebellion, notably the Peasants Revolt of 1381 which threatened the whole fabric of society. Again there is but one passing mention of it in Chaucer's work, though some marxist critics profess to hear its muffled reverberations throughout his work.

We do hear rather more about the major religious questions that beset people at the time. The profound dissatisfaction of many people with the institutional Church is reflected in Chaucer's satiric portraits of clerics in his General Prologue and in some of his tales. But his satire never shares the vehemence of a reformer like his contemporary John Wycliffe, a progenitor of the Reformation, who had to be protected from the wrath of senior churchmen by the power of John of Gaunt. Nor does it have the impassioned commitment of a different kind of reformer and different kind of poet, his other contemporary William Langland, author of Piers Plowman.

From his earliest years and over an extended period of time Chaucer had rather close contact with some of the most elevated and powerful people in the land, and yet in more than one place in his work he seems to deal in a very sympathetic way with the idea that true nobility, "gentlesse," is not a matter of "gentle" birth, but of moral quality. And his tales of "churls" (working people) show him at least as much at home with the world of the working class as with the aristocratic world portrayed in the Knight's tale. It is as well to remember that he did work for years in the customs at the port of London where he rubbed shoulders with everyone from common seamen through small-time pirates to merchant princes, who were often just bigger pirates.

It is hard now, after six hundred years and the writings of many great poets in English, to realize what a phenomenon Chaucer was. Every poet after him has had a great poet before him writing in English from whom to learn and borrow. Chaucer had no predecessor in English, for the literature of pre-conquest England which we call Old English was a closed book to him, and there seems to have been little English literature of any quality between the Norman Conquest and his time. So it is with reason that he is called the Father of English poetry. His only serious models were the great Latin poets of ancient Rome and the vernacular poets of more modern France and Italy. It was probably from the French and Italians that he got the idea for the English iambic pentameter line which he invented, and which is the line of all his major poetry and of almost all other major poetry in English, rhymed or unrhymed, from his day until very recent times, when metrical verse has largely gone out of fashion.
He was a diplomat, a senior civil servant who always worked for a living, and a scholar interested not only in poetry, but in science and philosophy. He translated the Consolations of Philosophy by Boethius, a book whose influence on him and on the rest of the literate medieval world it would be difficult to overestimate. And, because astronomy was one of his passions, he wrote for his "little son Lewis" a Treatise on the Astrolabe, an instrument for studying the heavens. He knew the standard theories on dreams, and the standard authorities on the theological-philosophical problem of Predestination. He was, in fact, the first of a long line of poets in English who were nearly as learned as they were poetically gifted.
Linguistic Introduction

A Short Note on How the Text may be Read

This is mostly a brief summary of what is said at greater length below.

Readers are invited to pronounce or not, as they see fit, all instances of dotted ẹ, as in "Inspirèd", "easèd", "younger", "sunnè".

This superscript dot indicates a letter that was probably pronounced in Chaucer's medieval poetic dialect, possibly with a light schwa sound, a kind of brief "-eh". Hence, this modspell text has kept some medieval spellings that differ somewhat from ours: "sweetè" for "sweet", "halfè" for "half", "couldè" for "could", "lippès" for "lips", and so on. This preserves the extra syllable to indicate the more regular meter that many scholars insist was Chaucer's, and that many readers will prefer. The reader is the final judge.

It is perfectly possible to read "With locks curled as they were laid in press" rather than "With lockès curled as they were laid in press." Some would prefer "She let no morsel from her lips fall" over "She let no morsel from her lippès fall". Similarly a sentence of strong monosyllables like "With scaled brows black and pilèd beard" should be at least as good as "With pilèd browès black and pilèd beard." Chaucer’s verse is strong and flexible enough to accommodate both. A stanza like the following could get much of the effect of the pronounced -e- from a crisp pronunciation of final consonants or separation of words: young -- knights with a pause after knights:

This Troilus as he was wont to guide
His younger knightès, led them up and down
In thilkē largē temple on every side, Beholding ay the ladies of the town Now here, how there, for no devotion Had he to none to reiven him his rest. But gan to praise and lacken whom him lest.

(Troilus & Criseyde: I, 20)

In this deprive him of And blame

There is nothing to prevent any reader from ignoring the superscript -ë- whenever you feel that is appropriate. Similarly you may wish (or not) to pronounce the ĭ of words like devotion, to make three syllables for the word instead of two, etc. The text offers a choice. Blameth not me if that you choose amiss.

The medieval endings of some words, especially verbs, in -n or -en have been retained for reasons of smoother rhythm: lacken, sleepen, seeken, weren, woulden, liven, withouten. Such words mean the same with or without the -n or -en. Also words beginning y- mean the same with or without the y- as in y-tied, y-taught.

An acute accent indicates that a word was probably stressed in a different way from its modern counterpart: uságe, viságe, daggér, mannér, serviceáble to rhyme with table.
The Language of this Edition

Some Chaucerians, act as if the works of the poet should be carefully kept away from the general reader and student, and reserved for those few who are willing to master the real difficulties of Middle English grammar and spelling, and the speculative subtleties of hypothetical Middle English pronunciation. Others may read him in translation if they wish!

The text of this edition in modern English spelling is intended to subvert that misguided notion. It is designed for those readers in school, university, living room or commuter train who would like to read or re-read Chaucer almost as readily as they can read or re-read other classics in English, readers who do not want the vagaries of archaic Middle English spelling, nor yet a flat translation. Very few scholars now read Shakespeare in the spelling of his day, but all readers of Chaucer are forced to read him in the spelling of his day, and this is a great obstacle for most people. This edition is meant to supply a version of Chaucer that avoids both simple translation and pointless archaism.

This edition is not a translation. The grammar, the syntax, and the vocabulary of this modspell edition remain essentially unchanged from the language of the original. Everything is Chaucer’s except for the spelling. Hence it can also be used as an accompanying or preliminary text by those who wish to master Chaucer's dialect as it is displayed in scholarly editions.

Here are some simple examples of changes from the manuscript forms. The citations are from *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Categories overlap a little.

### Spelling and Inflections

Virtually all words are spelled in the modern way. A few examples from the early parts of
Troilus & Criseyde will illustrate:

\[
\text{Fro wo to wele} \quad \text{becomes} \quad \text{From woe to weal;}
\]
\[
\text{ye loveres} \quad \text{is changed to} \quad \text{you lovers.}
\]

\[
\text{if any drope of pyte in yow be}
\]
\[
\text{becomes}
\]
\[
\text{if any drop of pity in you be}
\]

Here \text{be} rhymes with \text{adversity} rather than with \text{adversité}.

\[
\text{ye han wonne hym with to gret an ese}
\]
\[
\text{becomes}
\]
\[
\text{you have won him with too great an ease.}
\]

Notice that the vocabulary does not change, only the spelling. Even some archaic spellings are retained:

\[
\text{For by that morter which that I see bren}
\]
\[
\text{Know I full well that day is not far henne.}
\]

(a) Since the modspell forms \text{burn} and \text{hence} would give no kind of rhyme, \text{bren} and \text{henne}, are retained and explained in a gloss.

(b) More frequently the older form is kept for the rhythm where the extra syllable is needed. The most frequent and most noticeable occurrences are for those words ending in \text{-en:} \text{bathen, departen, wroughten}. The words mean the same with or without the \text{-e\text{n}.} Similarly \text{aboven, withouten}. Many other words also have an \text{-e-} that we no longer use either in spelling or pronunciation. When it is necessary or helpful to keep such \text{-e-\text{s} they are marked with a dot:} \text{é}. (See Rhythm below).

The modern form of the third person singular present tense ends in \text{-s: he comes}. This was a dialectal form for Chaucer who thought it funny. His standard form ended in \text{-eth: he cometh}. Shakespeare could use either form—\text{comes} or \text{cometh}, one syllable or two—to suit his metrical needs. I follow his example here, using our modern form wherever the meter allows, as in the three occurrences in the first two stanzas of the \text{Canticus Troili} where I suspect that even with \text{cometh} (the spelling of the standard
The pronunciation was one syllable:

*If love be good, from whencë comes my woe?*

in place of: *If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo*

*....every torment and adversity*

*That comes of him may to me savory think*

in place of: *....every torment and adversite*

*That cometh of hym may to me savory thinke*

*From whencë comes my wailing and my plaint?*

in place of: *From whennes cometh my waillynge and my pleynte?*

By contrast the -eth is retained for the pentameter in the four rhyming words in *Troilus & Criseyde, I, 55*: defendeth / offendeth, availeth / saileth, and in the plural imperative that means the same with and without the -eth: Remembereth, Thinketh = Remember! *Think!*

Past participles of verbs that begin with y- are sometimes retained for the same reason. They also mean the same with or without the y-: y-born, y-wrought, y-beat for born, wrought, beaten. For both meaning and rhythm, a word like *bisynesse* is retained as *busyness* rather than as *business*.

**Vocabulary**

As we have said, the vocabulary remains intact throughout. The word *thee* is not changed to *you*, nor *wood* to *mad* when that is the meaning; *durste* means *dared*, *clepe* means *call*, *I wot* means *I know* and has the same number of syllables, but our word is not substituted for Chaucer's in any of these cases. In these and in many others like them where a word has become obsolete or has changed its meaning over the centuries, Chaucer's word is kept and the meaning given in a gloss in the margin where it can be readily glanced at or ignored. For Chaucer's *hem* and *hir(e)* I use *them* and *their* which were dialect forms in his day but which became standard like the -s of *sends*. Middle English used *his* to mean...
both *his* and *its*. I have generally used *its* when that is the meaning. Chaucerian English often used *there* to mean *where*; I generally use *where* when *there* might be confusing for a modern reader.

**Pronunciation**

Whether read silently or aloud this text is designed to accommodate the reader's own modern English pronunciation, modified wherever that reader thinks necessary for rhyme or rhythm. Scholars expect old spelling versions to be read in a reconstructed Middle English dialect whose sounds are at least as difficult to master as the archaic spelling, and the phonetic accuracy of the reconstruction is quite dubious. A regular assignment in college classes is for the students to memorize the first eighteen lines of the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* in this reconstructed dialect. Instructions on how to pronounce the different vowels, consonants and diphthongs in this reconstructed dialect can be found in standard old-spelling editions. For those who are curious to know how medievalists think Chaucer's verse *might* have sounded, I append a very rough "phonetic" transcription of those first eighteen lines of The General Prologue. Dotted -é's are pronounced; so is the -l- in *folk, half* and *palmers*. Syllables marked with an acute accent are stressed. (See further the section below on **Rhythm and Meter**):-
This passage and others are reproduced in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in Helge Kokeritz's pamphlet *A Guide To Chaucer's Pronunciation* (Holt, Rinehart: N.Y. 1962). Even in Kokeritz, which is the standard version, the uncertainties of the phonetics are clear from the fact that Kokeritz gives twelve alternative pronunciations in sixteen lines.

### Rhyme

In any modspell version of a Chaucer poem it is clear that some rhymes do not work perfectly or at all, though they did in the original Middle English. This is usually accounted for by the theory that English sounds have changed in a fairly systematic way over the centuries, a change especially noticeable (to us anyway) between about 1400 (the year Chaucer died) and 1800. The change is called the Great Vowel Shift. Roughly, this...
theory says that in Chaucer's day the long vowels were pronounced more or less as they
still are in modern Romance Languages. For example, the \textit{i} in \textit{mine} was pronounced like
the \textit{i} in the word \textit{machine}, a word that retains its French pronunciation. Hence, Chaucer's
\textit{mine} is pronounced \textit{mean}, his \textit{name} would rhyme with our \textit{calm}, his \textit{root} with our \textit{boat}
and so on.

This would not concern us much if the Great Vowel Shift theory worked perfectly; the
long vowel sounds might have changed radically, but if the change was consistent, the
words that rhymed then would rhyme now. But the Vowel Shift was not wholly
consistent, and its inconsistency is probably most observable in the shift from \textit{o} to \textit{u}. For
example, the theory says that words like \textit{root} and \textit{mood} were pronounced with an \textit{o} sound
--- \textit{rote} and \textit{mode}, and they have moved to a \textit{u} sound today. But for Chaucer the words
\textit{hood}, \textit{blood}, would both have rhymed with \textit{mood} and with each other (\textit{hode}, \textit{blade},
\textit{mode}); for us they are at best half rhymes or eye rhymes. Similarly \textit{deed} and \textit{dread}, \textit{mead}
and \textit{red}, \textit{have} and \textit{save}, \textit{heart} and \textit{convert} rhymed for him as they no longer do perfectly
for us.

Another reason that all of Chaucer's rhymes are not perfect for us is that some of his
French-derived words still had their French pronunciation or were still accented in a
French way. This accounts for the problem with now-imperfect rhymes like \textit{wise} / \textit{service}. The words \textit{creature} and \textit{nature} were both accented on the last syllable and the
first has three syllables, French fashion. These accents have generally been marked in the
text. Sometimes, however, I have not marked the text as in the following:

\begin{quote}
\it As to my doom in all of Troy city
\it Was none so fair, for-passing every wight
\it So angel like was her native beauty
\end{quote}

The original ME \textit{cite} for \textit{city} was probably pronounced French fashion with the accent on
the second syllable. But the reader can make the decision how to pronounce \textit{city}. The
French-influenced Middle English spelling of \textit{natif beaute} in the third line fairly clearly
indicated stress on the second syllable in each word. In reading to oneself, one can either
exaggerate a pronunciation in the French direction in order to make the rhymes work
fully, or simply accept the imperfections as half rhymes or eye rhymes which are well
established features of almost all rhymed verse in English. Most of the rhymes work very well, and a few half rhymes or eye rhymes simply add variety that should be acceptable to modern taste. (See also below the section on *Rhythm* and *Meter*).

We should also perhaps remember that many of the rhymes of later poets present much the same situation -- Shakespeare's sonnets or *Venus and Adonis*, Milton's rhymed poems, Donne's lyrics, and even Dryden's translations from Chaucer. Indeed the same final rhyming syllable that occurs in the description of the Squire in the General Prologue: *serviceable / table* also occurs in Milton's *Morning of Christ's Nativity* in the closing lines: *stable / serviceable*. This causes little difficulty for modern readers of Milton and the other poets, and produces no comment among their modern critics. The final rhyme in *Troilus and Criseyde*: *digne / benign* also provides a small challenge. Since *digne* is obsolete we can, presumably, give it any suitable pronunciation, in this case probably something like *dine*.

**Rhythm and Meter**

This section is closely related to the sections on Spelling and Pronunciation above.

Many Chaucerian plural and possessive nouns end in *-es* where our equivalents end in *-s*, and many of his words of all sorts end in an *-e* where we no longer have it:

```
Madame Pertelote, my worldes blisse
Herkneth thise blisful briddes how they synge
And se the fresshe floures how they sprynge.
```

It seems that Chaucer would have pronounced all the occurrences of *-es* and some of those of *-e* in these lines; the reader's sense of rhythm and meter has to tell him which *-e*'s, unless the "pronounced" *-e*'s are dotted, as they are not dotted in the manuscripts or in scholarly editions. So the rhythm of the original would be somewhat different from that of a radical modspell version (like my first edition of the *Tales* which dropped all the archaic *-e*'s):
Madam Pertelot, my world's bliss,
Hearken these blissful birds -- how they sing!
And see the fresh flowers -- how they spring!

The place of the syllabic -e's would have to be taken by apt pauses. That choice is still possible even after some of the -e's have been restored, as they are here to satisfy a more strictly iambic meter:

*Madamë Pertelot, my worldë's bliss,*
*Hearken these blissful birdës -- how they sing!*
*And see the freshë flowers -- how they spring!*

Sometimes the -e is pronounced or not pronounced in the same word depending on its position in the line. For example in the old-spelling *Troilus and Criseyde* the word *Troye/Troie* is almost invariably spelled with a final -e, which is pronounced or elided as the meter demands. In the modspell version the spelling reflects this:

- *The folk of Troie hire observaunces olde (I, 160)*
  - becomes *The folk of Troy their òbservances old (I, 16:6)*
  - but *Knew wel that Troie sholde destroied be (I, 68)*
  - becomes *Knew well that Troyë should destroyèd be (I, 6:5)*

There are many other occasions when the meter seems to require the pronunciation of a now silent or absent -e-. In such cases the è in this text generally has a superscript dot which the reader is free to ignore at will, thus:

*So that his soul her soulë follow might (II, 106.4)*

The question of pronounced -e- arises with particular frequency in the ending of verbs in the normal past tense or past participle as in the line just quoted:

*Knew well that Troyë should destroyèd be.*

where it is clear that -ed has to be pronounced in either version.
Or take this couplet from the *Canterbury Tales*, for example:

\[
\text{And set a supper at a certain price,} \\
\text{And we will rulèd be at his device.}
\]

The rhythm is improved if the *-ed of ruled* is pronounced as it almost certainly was in Chaucer's day and as *-ed* was often pronounced in poetry until almost modern times. In this text such *-ed's* are often marked where the editor feels that the rhythm would benefit, but I have not been relentless about it, and readers should use their own judgement about it. There is plenty of leeway for taste. A reader might easily decide for example, that the following line in the description of the leprous Summoner in the *Canterbury Tales* is best read as a series of strong monosyllables, and ignore the suggestion to pronounce the *-e's* of *scalled*, *browes* and *piled*:

\[
\text{With scallèd browès black and pilèd beard}
\]

Another illustration of a rhythmical question with a modspell version:

\[
\text{Make no comparison ...} \\
\text{Oh levè Pandare in condusion} \\
\text{I will not be of thine opinion}
\]

The editorial accent mark on the *i* of *condusion* and *opinion* suggests the possibility of pronouncing each word as four syllables: *con-clus-i-on, o-pin-i-on* as they presumably were in the original, but again the reader is free to prefer the normal three-syllable pronunciation and to be satisfied with a nine-syllable line, of which the Chaucer manuscripts have many.

One other thing to be kept in mind is that for Chaucer as for us there were unpronounced *-e's* and other unpronounced letters. In short, for him as for Shakespeare and for us, there was such a thing as elision, the dropping or blending of syllables, reducing the number that seem to be present on the page. Thus *ever* and *evil* may well have been pronounced *e'er* and *ill* where the rhythm suited as in the following:

\[
\text{“Alas!” quod Absalom, “and Welaway!}
\]
That true love was e’er so ill beset”
(Orig: That true love was ever so evil beset)

Remembereth you on passèd heaviness
That you have felt, and on the adversity
Of other folk

To get a pentameter Rememb’reth probably needs to be pronounced thus, eliding one of the e’s, and the adversity needs to be said as th’adversity even if these elisions are not so marked in the text.

Our modern pronunciation of generally often has three rather than four syllables, and a three-syllable sovereignty fits well with this couplet either in its Middle English or modspell form:

My liegé lady, generally, quod he,
Women desiren to have sovereignty

Elision or slurring is particularly noticeable in a word like benedicitee, a common exclamation with Chaucer's characters in the Tales. It was clearly pronounced with anything from two to five syllables to fit the rhythm: benstee, bensitee, bendisitee, ben-e-disitee. And a line like the following is an impossible pentameter without some elision:

And certes yet ne dide I yow nevere unright

Look at the two different forms of the same verb in the following consecutive lines of Middle English:

Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone.
Than comth oure verray gentillesse of grace

The spelling comth, occurs in the second line in two MSS, suggesting a common pronunciation of the word, whatever way it was spelled, a pronunciation something like comes in both lines.

Assuming the following line to have ten syllables, the first word should come out as one syllable:
Fareth every knight thus with his wife as ye?

Here the pronunciation of *Fareth* may have verged on *Fares*, its modern form, which I have adopted. Analogously, we are so accustomed to pronouncing *every* as two syllables that we do not notice that it is written with three. The alert reader will see and adapt to other such occurrences in the course of reading this version.

**STRESS:** In some lines an acute accent is inserted to suggest a probable emphasis different from our current stress patterns

\[
If\ this\ be\ wist,\ but\ e'er\ in\ thine\ absénce
\]

or

\[
And\ short\ and\ quick\ and\ full\ of\ high\ senténce
\]

and rhyming groups like the following:

\[
sort/\ comfort;\ dance/penánce;\ disâventure/creäture/measúre
\]

Reading a modspell edition of *The Canterbury Tales* or of *Troilus and Criseyde* needs goodwill, some intelligence, humor, adaptability, and a little skill, qualities that most of us would readily confess to.
Select Glossary of Important Terms

Even a quick look at this section will be very helpful for a reading of the Tales.

AUTHORITY, Auctoritē, Authors: The literate in the Middle Ages were remarkably bookish in spite of or because of the scarcity of books. They had a great, perhaps inordinate, regard for "authority," that is, established "authors": philosophers of the ancient world, classical poets, the Bible, the Church Fathers, historians, theologians, etc. Citing an "authority" was then, as now, often a substitute for producing a good argument, and then, as now, always useful to bolster an argument. The opening line of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue uses "authority" to mean something like "theory"— what you find in books — as opposed to "experience" — what you find in life.

CLERK: Strictly speaking a member of the clergy, either a priest or in the preliminary stages leading up to the priesthood, called "minor orders." Learning and even literacy were largely confined to such people, but anyone who could read and write as well as someone who was genuinely learned could be called a clerk. A student, something in between, was also a clerk. The Wife of Bath marries for her fifth husband, a man who had been a clerk at Oxford, a student who had perhaps had ideas at one time of becoming a cleric.

CHURL, churlish: At the opposite end of the social scale and the scale of manners from "gentil" (See below). A "churl" (Old E "ceorl") was a common man of low rank. Hence the manners to be expected from a person of such "low birth" were equally low and vulgar, "churlish." "Villain" and "villainy" are rough equivalents also used by Chaucer.

COMPLEXION: See Humor below

COURTESY, Courteous, Courtoisie, etc.: Courtesy was literally conduct appropriate to the court of the king or other worthy. This, no doubt, included our sense of "courtesy" but was wider in its application, referring to the manners of all well bred people. The Prioress’s concern

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2 At the end there is another glossary with more words but with briefer definitions.
to "counterfeit cheer of court" presumably involves imitating all the mannerisms thought appropriate to courtiers. Sometimes it is used to mean something like right, i.e. moral, conduct.

DAUN, Don: A term of respect for nobles or for clerics like the monk. The Wife of Bath refers to the wise "king Daun Solomon," a phrase where it would be wise to leave the word untranslated. But Chaucer uses it also of Gervase, the blacksmith in the Miller's Tale. And Spenser used it of Chaucer himself.

DAUNGER, Daungerous: These do not mean modern "danger" and "dangerous." "Daunger" (from OF "daungier") meant power — in romantic tales the power that a woman had over a man who was sexually attracted by her. She was his "Mistress" in the sense that she had power over him, often to refuse him the least sexual favor. Hence "daungerous" often indicated a woman who was "hard-to-get" or over-demanding or disdainful, haughty, aloof.

DREAMS: There was a good deal of interest in dream theory in the Middle Ages, and considerable difference of opinion: some held that dreams were generally inconsequential, others that dreams often were of considerable significance. Those of the "significant" school had biblical support from both testaments e.g. Pharaoh's dream of the fat cows and lean cows and Joseph's interpretation (Gen. 41) and many others in the OT, and in the NT, e.g. the other Joseph's dreams that assured him that Mary his wife was pregnant with Christ through divine intervention (Matt. 1:20, 2:13-20). They also had Macrobius's famous Commentary on the Dream of Scipio which distinguished between 5 different kinds of dream, 3 of them significant ("visio, somnium, and oraculum") and 2 insignificant ("insomnium" and "visum" or "phantasma"). The first 3 were felt to be prophetic in one way or another by Macrobius; the other 2 either simply carried on the worries or desires of the day, or were formed of disconnected and fragmentary images (phantasma) supposedly the result of indigestion. These last two, of least interest to the philosopher, might be of more interest to the psychologist and poet. Chaucer has several dream vision poems, in most of which he has some discussion of dream theory: The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame, The Legend of Good Women, The Parliament of Fowls, especially the opening of House of Fame on the causes and significance of dreams. The argument of Chanticleer with Pertelote about the value of his dream in The Nun's Priest's Tale illustrates the common medieval disagreements, and brings up references to a number of the authorities that have been mentioned above.

The most influential sources of the tradition of writing dream poems were Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy and the Romance of the Rose, a French poem of the early 13th century. Chaucer had translated both of these in whole or in part.
"GENTLE, Gentil, Gentilesse: "Gentilesse" (Gentleness) is the quality of being "gentil" or "gentle" i.e. born into the upper class, and having "noble" qualities that were supposed to go with noble birth, the "gens" or family into which one was born, hence one’s “genes.” It survives also in the word "gentleman" especially in a phrase like "an officer & a gentleman" since officers traditionally were members of the ruling class. Chaucer seems to have had a healthy sceptical bourgeois view of the notion that "gentilesse" went always with "gentle" birth. See the lecture on the subject given by the "hag" in the Wife of Bath's Tale (1109-1176). But since "gentle" is used also to describe the Tabard Inn and the two greatest scoundrels on the pilgrimage, the Summoner and the Pardoner, one must suppose that it had a wide range of meanings, some of them perhaps ironic.

GOSSIP: From Old English "God sib," literally a "God relation," i.e. a spiritual relation from baptism, a godchild or godparent. By Chaucer's time, it meant "confidant" with a flavor of our modern meaning to it.

HUMOR (Lat. humor--fluid, moisture) / COMPLEXION: Classical, medieval and Renaissance physiologists saw the human body as composed of four fluids or humors: yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm. Perfect physical health and intellectual excellence were seen as resulting from the presence of these four humors in proper balance and combination. As Antony says of Brutus in Julius Caesar

   His life was gentle, and the elements
   So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
   And say to all the world "This was a man"
   (V,v,73-75).

Philosophers and physiologists, seeing man as a microcosm, corresponded each bodily humor to one of the four elements — fire, water, earth, air.

Pain or illness was attributed to an imbalance in these bodily fluids, and an overabundance of any single humor was thought to give a person a particular personality referred to as "humor" or "complexion." The correspondences went something like this:

   Fire--Yellow or Red Bile (Choler)--Choleric, i.e. prone to anger
   Earth-- Black Bile-- melancholic i.e. prone to sadness
   Water-- Blood-- sanguine--inclined to cheerfulness, optimism
   Air -- Phlegm -- phlegmatic--prone to apathy, slow
Too much red bile or choler could make you have nightmares in which red things figured; with too much black bile you would dream about black monsters. (See *Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 4120-26). "Of his complexion he was sanguine" is said of the Franklin in the *General Prologue*. Similarly, the Reeve "was a slender choleric man" (*G.P.* 589). The Franklin's "complexion" (i.e. humor) makes him cheerful, and the Reeve's makes him cranky. A person's temperament was often visible in his face, hence our modern usage of "complexion." Even when the physiological theory of humors had long been abandoned, the word "humor" retained the meaning of "mood" or "personality." And we still speak of being in a good or bad humor.

LEMMAN: A lover, a sweetheart. Not a courtly term, but used by the likes of Nicholas and Absalom about Alison in the *Millers Tale,* for example. The Manciple has a long gloss on this "knasivh" word used of poorer women, but not to be used of ladies (unless they are trollops too). It is, he says, the equivalent of "wench." See *Manciple's T.* 205 ff.

LIKEROUS: Lecherous, though this sometimes seems a harsh rendering. In the *Miller's Tale* Alison has a "likerous" eye. "Lecherous" might fit there, though "flirtatious" is probably better. In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (732) it is used of Lucia who was so "likerous" of her husband that she killed him. "Jealous" seems a more accurate rendering here.

LORDINGS: Something like "Ladies and Gentlemen." The first citation in OED contrasts "lordings" with "underlings." "Lordings" is used by both the Host and the Pardoner to address the rest of the pilgrims, not one of whom is a lord, though the Host also calls them "lords."

NONE: For the Nones; For the Nonce: literally "for the once," "for the occasion", but this meaning often does not fit the context in Chaucer, where the expression is frequently untranslatable, and is used simply as a largely meaningless tag, sometimes just for the sake of the rime.

SHREW: "Shrew, shrewed, beshrew" occur constantly in the Tales and are particularly difficult to gloss. The reader is best off providing his own equivalent in phrases like "old dotard shrew" (291) or "I beshrew thy face."

SILLY, Sely: Originally in Old English "saelig" = "blessed." By ME it still sometimes seems to retain some of this sense. It also means something like "simple", including perhaps "simpleminded" as in the case of the Carpenter John in the *Millers Tale*. The Host's reference to the "silly maid" after the *Physician's Tale* means something like "poor girl." and the "sely widow" of *Nuns Priests Tale* is a "poor widow" in the same sense. The Wife of Bath refers to the genital organ of the male as "his silly instrument."

SOLACE: Comfort, pleasure, often of a quite physical, indeed sexual, nature, though not exclusively so.
WIT: Rarely if ever means a clever verbal and intellectual sally, as with us. It comes from the OE verb "witan," to know, and hence as a noun it means "knowledge" or "wisdom" "understanding" "comprehension," "mind," "intelligence" etc.

End of Linguistic Introduction