

# THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

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The General Prologue and Sixteen Tales

*A READER-FRIENDLY EDITION*

*Put into modern spelling*

by

MICHAEL MURPHY

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Two similar editions of **Troilus and Criseyde** ( abbreviated and unabbreviated) are also available on this site.

Separate print editions of some of the tales as edited here are available:

1. **A Canterbury Quintet** (ISBN 893385-02-7) containing the General Prologue and the tales of the Miller, the Wife, the Pardoner, and the Nun's Priest.
2. **Canterbury Marriage Tales** (ISBN 0-9679557-1-8) which has the tales of the Wife, the Clerk, the Merchant and the Franklin.

These are available from LittleLeaf Press, PO Box 187, Milaca, MN 56353

[littleleaf@maxminn.com](mailto:littleleaf@maxminn.com)

<http://www.maxminn.com/littleleaf>

The editor can be reached at the following addresses:

Sarsfield0@aol.com (zero after Sarsfield)

or at

641 East 24 St, Brooklyn, New York 11210.

The fuzziness of the letters on some screens will not affect the clarity of printouts.

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

I am deeply indebted to **Nick Irons**, Manager of the Faculty Computer Lab, and to **Suzu Samuel**, his assistant, for the expertise needed to put this edition on the Internet.

This edition is designed to make the text of a great medieval English classic more reader-friendly to students and general readers, especially to those who are not English majors and those not interested in becoming medievalists.

It is **NOT** a translation. The words are Chaucer's line for line. Only the spelling is modernized, as it is in Shakespeare texts.

It is more faithful than a translation but is a lot less demanding than the standard Middle English text. It is better than a translation because it keeps the verse **and** in Chaucer's own language, but in a friendlier form than the old-spelling version.

With this text, readers have the language that Chaucer wrote, but without the frustration of trying to master the vagaries of Middle English spelling. The change in spelling is meant to allow the reader to enjoy Chaucer not merely endure him. Even so, this edition is a good deal more conservative than Coleridge was prepared to accept :

### **On Modernizing the Text**

Let a few plain rules be given for sounding the final *è* of syllables and for expressing the termination of such words as *ocèan*, and *nation*, etc, as disyllables -- or let the syllables to be sounded in such cases be marked by a competent metrist. This simple expedient would, with a very few trifling exceptions where the errors are inveterate, enable any reader to feel the perfect smoothness and harmony of Chaucer's verse. As to understanding his language, if you read twenty pages with a good glossary, you surely can find no further difficulty, even as it is; but I should have no objection to see this done: Strike out those words which are now obsolete, and I will venture to say that I will replace every one of them by words still in use out of Chaucer himself, or Gower his disciple. I don't want this myself: I rather like to see the significant terms which Chaucer unsuccessfully offered as candidates for admission into our language; but surely so very slight a change of the text may well be pardoned, even by black-letterati, for the purpose of restoring so great a poet to his ancient and most deserved popularity.

Coleridge, *Table Talk*, March 15, 1834

## The Language of this Edition<sup>1</sup>

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 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 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 or scholarly 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

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<sup>1</sup> A one-page version of this linguistic introduction can be found on p.xii below. For fuller development of the argument sketched here see my articles "On Not Reading Chaucer -- Aloud," *Mediaevalia*, 9 (1986 for 1983), 205-224, and "On Making an Edition of The Canterbury Tales in Modern Spelling," *Chaucer Review* 26 (1991), 48-64.

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

*Fro wo to wele* becomes *From woe to weal*;  
*ye loveres* is changed to *you lovers*.

*if any drope of pyte in yow be*  
 becomes  
*if any drop of pity in you be*

Here *be* rhymes with *adversity* rather than with *adversité*.

*ye han wonne hym with to gret an ese*  
 becomes  
*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:

*For by that mortar which that I see bren* lamp / burn  
*Know I full well that day is not far henne.* hence

(a) Since the modspell forms *burn* and *hence* would give no kind of rhyme, *bren* and *henne*, are retained and glossed.

(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 *-en*: *bathen*, *departen*, *wroughten*. The words mean the same with or without the *-(e)n*. Similarly *aboven*, *withouten*. Many other words also have an *-e-* that we no longer use either in spelling or pronunciation. When it is necessary or helpful to keep such *-e-*'s they are marked with a dot: *ê*. (See **Rhythm** below).

The modern form of the third person singular present tense ends in *-s*: *he comes*. This was a dialectal form for Chaucer who thought it funny. His standard form ended in *-eth*: *he cometh*. Shakespeare could use either form—*comes* or *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 *Canticus Troili* where I suspect that even with *cometh* (the spelling of the standard edition) the pronunciation was one syllable:

in place of: *If love be good, from whencè comes my woe ?*  
*If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo*

in place of : *....every torment and adversity*  
*That comes of him may to me savory think*  
*....every torment and adversite*  
*That cometh of hym may to me savory thinke*

in place of:            *From whencè comes my wailing and my plaint?*  
                              *From whennes cometh my waillynge and my pleynte?*

By contrast the *-eth* is **retained** for the pentameter in the four rhyming words in **T & C, 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, but 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 *-è's* are pronounced; so is the *-l-* in *folk, half* and *palms*. Syllables marked with an acute accent are stressed. (See further the section below on **Rhythm and Meter**) :-

## Phonetic Version

Whan that Avril with his shoorez sote-eh  
The druughth of March hath perséd toe the rote-eh,  
And baathéd every vein in swich licoor  
Of which vertúe engendréd is the flure,  
Whan Zephirus ache with his swayt-eh braith,  
Inspeeréd hath in every holt and haith  
The tender crophez, and the yung-eh sun-eh  
Hath in the Ram his hal-f coorse y-run-eh,  
And smaaleh foolez maaken melody-eh  
That slaipen al the nicked with awpen ee-eh  
So pricketh hem Nat-yóor in hir cooráhjez--  
Than longen fol-k to gawn on pilgrimahjez  
And pal-mers for to saiken straunj-eh strondez  
To ferneh halwehs couth in sundry londez  
And spesyaly from every sheerez end-eh  
Of Engelond to Caunterbry they wend-eh  
The hawly blissful martyr for to saik-eh  
That hem hath holpen whan that they were saik-eh.

## Hengwrt Manuscript

Whan that Auerylle with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March / hath perced to the roote  
And bathed euery veyne in swich lycour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour  
Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in euery holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes / and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram / his half cours yronne  
And smale foweles / maken melodye  
That slepen al the nyght with open Iye  
So priketh hem nature / in hir corages  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilrymages  
And Palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes  
To fernè halwes / kouthe in sondry londes  
And specially / from euery shyres ende  
Of Engelond / to Caunterbury they wende  
The holy blisful martir / for to seke  
That hem hath holpen whan at they weere seeke.

This passage and others are reproduced in the International Phonetic Alphabet 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 fifteen 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 *i* in *mine* was pronounced like the *i* in the word *machine*, a word that retains its French pronunciation. Hence, Chaucer's *mine* is pronounced *mean*, his *name* would rhyme with our *calm*, his *root* with our *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 *o* to *u*. For example, the theory says that words like *root* and *mood* were pronounced with an *o* sound -- *rote* and *mode*, and they have moved to a *u* sound today. But for Chaucer the words *hood*, *blood*, would both have rhymed with *mood* and with each other ( *hode*,

*blode, mode*); for us they are at best half rhymes or eye rhymes. Similarly *deed* and *dread, mead* and *red, have* and *save, heart* and *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 *wise / service*. The words *creature* and *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:

*As to my doom in all of Troy **city***  
*Was none so fair, for-passing every wight*  
*So angel like was her **native beauty***

The original ME *cite* for *city* was probably pronounced French fashion with the accent on the second syllable. But the reader can make the decision how to pronounce *city*. The French-influenced Middle English spelling of *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:



*Madáme Pertelote, my worldes blisse  
Herkneth thise blissful 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:

*Madamè Pertelot, my worldè's bliss,  
Hearken these blissful birdès -- how they sing!  
And see the freshè 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:

		<i>The folk of Troie hire observaunces olde (I, 160)</i>
becomes		<i>The folk of Troy their óservances old (I, 16:6)</i>
but		
		<i>Knew wel that Troie sholde destroièd be (I, 68)</i>
becomes		<i>Knew well that Troyè should destroyèd be (I, 6:5)</i>

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 soulè 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 Troyè 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:

*And set a supper at a certain price,  
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*:

*With scallèd browès black and pilèd beard*

Another illustration of a rhythmical question with a modspell version:

*Make no comparison ...  
Oh levè Pandare in conclusion  
I will not be of thine opinion*

The editorial accent mark on the *i* of *conclusion* 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:

*“Alas!” quod Absalom, “and Welaway!  
That truè 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 liegè 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 / comfórt; dance / penánce; disáventure / 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.

### A Short Note on How the Text may be Read

This is mostly a brief summary of what has been said at greater length above.

Readers are invited to pronounce or not, as they see fit, all instances of dotted ê, as in "Inspired", "easêd", "youngê", "sunnê".

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: "sweetê" for "sweet", "halfê" for "half", "couldê" for "could", "lippês" 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 lockês 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 lippês fall". Similarly a sentence of strong monosyllables like "With scaled brows black and piled beard" should be at least as good as "With pilêd browês black and pilêd beard." As in these examples 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*

<i>This Troilus as he was wont to guide</i>	<i>accustomed to</i>
<i>His youngê knightês, led them up and down</i>	
<i>In thilkê largê temple on every side,</i>	<i>In this</i>
<i>Beholding ay the ladies of the town</i>	
<i>Now here, how there, for no devotion</i>	
<i>Had he to none to reiven him his rest.</i>	<i>deprive him of</i>
<i>But gan to praise and lacken whom him lest.</i>	<i>And blame</i>

(Troilus & Criseyde: I, 20)

There is nothing to prevent any reader from ignoring the superscript -ê- whenever you feel that is appropriate. Similarly you may wish (or not) to pronounce the ï of words like *devotiön*, 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**.

End of Introduction