

Mueller

Middle English Phonology

The following is meant to be a user friendly guide to Middle English phonology. Pay special attention to the words in bold. See also Harvard's helpful Chaucer website for pronunciation practice: www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/pronunciation.

Vowels

You will notice that Middle English (ME) vowels tend to be purer than Present-Day English (PDE) vowels. Also note that there are a few sounds that have no ME example.

IPA symbol	PDE equivalent sound	ME spelling	ME example
/a/	father, spa (like "ahhhhh!")	a, aa	April, bathed, smale, maken
/e/	cake, mistake, escape	ee, e	sweete, slepen, semed, seege
/ɛ/	like the sound in "set"	ee, e	heeth, breeth
/i/	feet, treat, easel	i, y	inspired, I, by
/o/	ghost, telephone, goad	oo, o	soote, roote, to, bokes, bord
/ɔ/	law, cough, bought, dawn	oo, o	stone, hooly, born, hope, longen
/u/	boot, flute, pool, moot	ou, ow	foules, shoures, flour
/ʊ/	wool	u, o	sonne, love, worthy, ful
/au/	found, house	au, aw	felaweship, Flaundres, faught
/æi/	close to "die" + "eh"	ai, ay, ei, ey	day, reysed, again
/iu/	mute, beauty	u, eu, ew	stature, newe, trewe
/ɔu/	something like "law" + "uh"	ou, ow	soules

Consonants

For more extensive help with ME consonants, see Moore and Wright, *An Elementary Middle English Grammar*, 1923. Most ME consonants may be pronounced as in PDE, but you will need to learn the following rules:

c before guttural (back) vowels and liquids, the sound of "k": ME examples include "cat," "cold," and "cuppe"

before and between palatal vowels, the sound of unvoiced "s" in French words such as "citee" and "deceiven"

- g initial, voiced and explosive (the so-called "hard" g) - "gate, glad, grene"
in French loan words, medially before vowels the sound was "j" as in "chargen" and "jugen"
- gh these are non-English sounds: German "ach" and "ich"; sound is made by opening the mouth wide and forcing air through the furthest back part of mouth
- gn, kn neither g nor k is silent in this combination in ME - both are hard sounds - practice saying "knight" - something like "ka-nichhhh-t" and you'll get both this sound and the previous one
- l pronounced before f, k, m
- s unvoiced generally when in unstressed positions (at the end of words, especially) - the sound of PDE "bliss" rather than "was"; but voiced between vowels, for example in ME "nose" the "s" is pronounced like a "z"