



## What It Means

To get started, don't worry about how a word should sound. Just try to figure out the meaning. You should be able to make sense out of most of the words with little or no trouble. Many of them are familiar, just spelled oddly.

chirches = churches  
preche = preach  
peyne = pain  
speche = speech  
ringe = ring  
belle = bell  
telle = tell

Other words take a little more head scratching but still aren't too difficult. We still use the word *rote* to mean "by memory" or "by heart." *Lordinges* looks like *lords*, so it's a good guess that it means something like "gentlemen" or "gentlefolk." *Quod* looks like *quote*, so *quod he* surely means "said he." *Hauteyn* looks like *heightened*, so the Pardoner seems to mean that his speech is fancy or highfalutin—or possibly just plain loud.

That leaves only three words that might still give you trouble. But you can probably use their context to guess what they mean.

han = have  
gooth = goes  
kan = knows

Now you know enough to come up with your own modern English translation of these four Middle English lines. It might go something like this:

"Gentlefolk," said he, "in churches when I preach,  
I take pains to speak in a fancy manner,  
And let my voice ring out as roundly as a bell,  
For I know all that I tell by rote."

As you can see, it's not too hard to catch Chaucer's meaning, even in the Middle English original. In fact, Chaucer is often at least as easy to

understand as Shakespeare, who wrote 200 years later. Unfortunately, pronouncing Chaucer's words is another story.

## How It Sounds

During the time between Chaucer and Shakespeare, the English language went through what is called the Great Vowel Shift. Little by little, English pronunciation changed—especially the vowels. To give some idea of how drastic this change was, linguist David Crystal came up with a simple demonstration. Read aloud the following modern English sentence:

So it is time to see the shoes on the same feet now.

Now read aloud this reworking of the same sentence:

Saw it is team to say the shows on the sarm  
fate noo.

You've just said the sentence with an approximate Middle English pronunciation—or at least that's what scholars believe. There were no tape recorders or CD players in 14th-century England, so nobody knows for certain just how people spoke all those years ago. But linguists think they have a pretty good idea.

Let's look at the pronunciations of certain words in our four-line passage:

**LORDINGES**—Every consonant is usually pronounced in Middle English. So say every consonant in this word loud and clear:  
"LOR-din-gus"

**QUOD**—Pronounce the "o" sound the same as in today's English word *goat*: "kwoad."

**HE**—The *h* is silent in short words like this; the vowel rhymes with *day*: "ey"

**WHAN**—The *w* and the *h* are both pronounced; the “a” sound is like “ah”: “w-hahn”

The “I” sound is like today’s long *e*: “ee”

**PEYNE**—The “ey” sound slurs “a” as in *day* and “i” as in *win* together: “peyin.”

**HAUTEYN**—The *h* is silent because it comes from a French word; *au* sounds like *ow* in today’s *how*: “OW-teyin”

**OUT**—The *ou* sounds like “oo” in the modern English *to*: “oot”

**GOOTH**—Pronounce the “oo” sound like the *oa* in *goat*: “goath”

These are extremely simplified, approximate pronunciations. For example, the “o” sound in the words *quod* and *gooth* are slightly different. Middle English is too varied, subtle, and tricky a language to explain fully here. But these suggestions will help you get a quick idea of the peculiar and yet lovely sounds of Chaucer’s speech.

## What About That E?

In today’s English, we are used to silent *e*’s at the ends of many words, as in *twine* and *cane*. In Chaucer’s English, the final *e* is not always silent. Sometimes it is pronounced as an “uh” sound. But scholars disagree on when the final *e* should or should not be silent. One rule of thumb is to always pronounce it in a word that comes at the end of a line. For example, it should be pronounced in the word *preche* at the end of the first line: “PREYCH-uh.”

In other places, consider the rhythm of the words. Chaucer’s poetry is written in iambs—that is, with a “tah-TUM, tah-TUM, tah-TUM” sort of rhythm. In some places, pronouncing an *e* helps make the rhythm stronger—for example, the word *rote* in the last line:

for EE cahn AHL bee ROAT-uh  
THAHT ee TEL-uh

In other places, the rhythm is stronger without pronouncing the *e*—for example, the word *ringe* in the third line:

and RING it OOT as ROON-d as  
GOATH a BEL-uh

## Speak It Yourself

Now try saying it aloud.

LOR-din-gus, kwoad EY, in  
CHURCH-uhz W-HAHN ee  
PREYCH-uh, ee PEYIN-uh MEY to  
AHN an OW-teyin SPEYCH-uh,  
and RING it OOT as ROON-D as  
GOATH a BEL-uh, for EE CAHN  
AHL bee ROAT-uh THAHT  
ee TEL-uh.

There. You’ve just spoken four lines of Chaucer’s verse—in an extremely loose and approximate way, of course.

## Where To Hear More

There are many places where you can learn much more about speaking Chaucer’s language, including a Harvard Web site that includes audio recordings of experts reading from *The Canterbury Tales*. Its address is [www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer](http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer).

Another guide to Chaucer’s pronunciation by the Chaucer biographer John Gardner can be found at [www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/oconnell/pronunciation.htm](http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/oconnell/pronunciation.htm). Gardner’s suggestions are bluntly geared toward learning how to “fake it convincingly”—which is really all you’ve learned how to do here.

But unless you’re planning to travel back to 14th-century England, “faking it” is surely good enough! ■