

DREAM VISIONS  
AND OTHER POEMS  
GEOFFREY CHAUCER



EDITED BY KATHRYN L. LYNCH

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Geoffrey Chaucer  
DREAM VISIONS  
AND OTHER POEMS



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AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS  
CONTEXTS  
CRITICISM

*Selected and Edited by*  
KATHRYN L. LYNCH  
WELLESLEY COLLEGE



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Printed in the United States of America.  
First Edition.

The text of this book is composed in Fairfield Medium  
with the display set in Bernhard Modern.  
Composition by Binghamton Valley Composition.  
Manufacturing by the Courier Companies—Westford Division.  
Production manager: Benjamin Reynolds.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400  
[Poems. Selections]

Geoffrey Chaucer : dream visions and other poems : authoritative texts, contexts,  
criticism / selected and edited by Kathryn L. Lynch.  
p. cm. — (Norton critical edition)  
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-393-92588-3 (pbk.)  
ISBN-10: 0-393-92588-9 (pbk.)

I. Lynch, Kathryn L., 1951– II. Title.

PR1852.L96 2006  
821'.1—dc22  
2006046641

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110-0017  
[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)  
W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT  
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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# Preface

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This Norton Critical Edition is intended both for students just beginning their acquaintance with Chaucer and for those coming to what are sometimes referred to as his “minor poems”—his dream visions, short lyrics, complaints—for a deeper knowledge of the poet after reading his masterworks, the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>1</sup> Because beginning readers of Middle English form an important part of my audience, I provide extensive glosses of all unfamiliar words, expressions, and constructions, and translate both first and subsequent uses of difficult words unless they are found within a few lines; sometimes I offer more than one translation of a specific word to give the reader a sense of its semantic range and context. When there is no modern equivalent for a Middle English construction (for example, the distinction between the formal “you” and the familiar “thou”), I have preferred modern usage, but whenever it was possible I have stayed as close to Chaucer’s literal meaning as I could. My aim has been to provide whatever help is possible to an inexperienced reader. As Chaucer’s lexicon becomes more familiar, readers may find they are increasingly able to ignore the glosses, but the help is there whenever it is needed, and consequently reading can begin at any point and with any poem. A full translation of all the dream visions has not been made since Brian Stone’s Penguin edition over twenty years ago, and his is a poetic rather than a literal translation.<sup>2</sup> This heavily glossed edition should make it possible for even the beginning reader to experience Chaucer in his own words.

The first section presents the text. I have tried to construct a trustworthy text that does not offer unnecessary hardship to the reader who is first encountering a Middle English poem. My textual method can be summed up briefly: moderately conservative in respect to substance; moderately liberal in respect to spelling. To elaborate, my copy-text is W. W. Skeat’s late nineteenth-century edition of Chaucer’s complete poetry.<sup>3</sup> Despite being a somewhat enthusiastic reviser of the text, especially when he could improve a manuscript’s metrical regularity, Skeat had editorial instincts that are hard to match, which is the main reason for the tremendous influence of his work on subsequent editors. But Skeat sometimes falls victim to what one critic calls “a degree of emendatorial impetuosity.”<sup>4</sup> I have

1. The rubric “minor poems” is sometimes used only to refer to the short, lyric poems; but W. W. Skeat, in his edition, included the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Parliament of Fowls* in this group. Despite my hesitance in using the term, I prefer it here to “early poems” because the dating of Chaucer’s works is more fundamentally uncertain than many earlier critics have acknowledged; the term “early poems” prejudices questions of dating that I will take up in these pages. The short lyric “The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse” was most likely the latest of all his poems.

2. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Love Visions*, trans. Brian Stone (New York: Penguin, 1983).

3. *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1894).

4. A. S. G. Edwards, “Walter Skeat (1835–1912),” in *Editing Chaucer: The Great Tradition*, ed. Paul G. Ruggiers (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1984), 184.

thus taken care to compare his readings with those of all the original manuscripts, available in facsimiles and transcriptions, and to consult the work of other modern editions, listed in the Selected Bibliography at the end of this Norton Critical Edition. I have not followed Skeat when his emendations are clearly in conflict with the best manuscript evidence, even when his reading yields a smoother line.

The present moment is an especially exciting time for editorial work on Chaucer. Great strides have been made recently in editorial procedure and in our understanding of the history of Middle English dialects and scribal practice. The recent identification of Chaucer's scribe offers an example of the kind of breakthrough that makes working on Chaucer right now so exciting.<sup>5</sup> Computer applications are accelerating the pace of discovery and expanding the database of readings, allowing scholars to make ever more precise comparisons among different manuscript groups. The work being done on the *Canterbury Tales* by "The Canterbury Tales Project" <[www.cta.dmu.ac.uk/projects/ctp/index](http://www.cta.dmu.ac.uk/projects/ctp/index)> provides an especially thrilling example of the possibilities of technology in this area. This project makes available in electronic form all the manuscripts and early printed editions of the *Canterbury Tales*, enabling its creators to reconstruct a manuscript history or family tree more fully and reliably than has been done previously. We are thus on the verge of many new insights into Chaucer's texts, some of which have implications for the minor poems.

Chaucer's minor poems, however, differ from the *Canterbury Tales* in some important ways that affect editorial practice. There are many more manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* than of the dream visions, and the best of these are very early (increasingly, scholars are coming to think that the Hengwrt manuscript of the *Tales* may have been produced during the poet's lifetime and even perhaps supervised by Chaucer himself). There are far fewer manuscripts of Chaucer's minor poems, and some of the short poems—for example, "Merciless Beauty"—exist in only a single manuscript copy. Moreover, what manuscript evidence we have for Chaucer's minor poems is mostly later than that available for the *Canterbury Tales*. Although the manuscript commonly known as Gg (Cambridge University Library Gg 4.27), which contains texts of the *Parliament of Fowls*, the *Legend of Good Women*, and several of the shorter poems, can be dated to the first quarter of the fifteenth century, it is written in an East Anglian dialect quite different from the rest of the manuscript tradition.<sup>6</sup> And the other important manuscripts of these poems come from the middle of the century (e.g., perhaps the most important single manuscript for many of them, Fairfax 16, Bodleian Library) or even later, which means that their grammatical and lexical forms and spellings, produced decades after Chaucer's death, are quite unlikely to have been his own.

Furthermore, because they sometimes include material not found in the manuscripts, early print editions of the minor poems take on an importance that they do not have for the *Tales*. Consider, for example, the *Book of the Duchess*, a poem that appears in only three manuscripts, none before the second quarter of the fifteenth century. All three of these manuscripts are defective, lacking lines 31–96, which first appear in the 1532 edition

5. Linne Mooney, "Chaucer's Scribe," *Speculum* 81 (2006): 97–138.

6. M. B. Parkes and Richard Beadle, *Poetical Works, Geoffrey Chaucer: A Facsimile of Cambridge University Library MS Gg.4.27*, vol. 3 (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1980), 46–56.

of William Thynne, suggesting to some scholars that Thynne may have had access to a manuscript that no longer survives. Yet other readings in Thynne are manifestly inferior to those found in the manuscripts. What status are we then to give Thynne's printed text, published more than one hundred years after Chaucer's death? Can we trust its additions?<sup>7</sup> The complex and somewhat chaotic manuscript and printing history of Chaucer's early poems means that any edition must proceed by a series of critical judgments about such matters that cannot be fully verified. While each poem has a "best text" (which I will indicate in the individual introductions), the readings of that text must be evaluated in light of the entire manuscript tradition. In the case of the *Book of the Duchess*, I have included the lines from Thynne's edition as the best solution to the problem of the missing lines in the manuscript witnesses, but even a beginning student needs to keep in mind that a medieval poem does not have the editorial stability of a modern book. Print gives the book the look of a fixed and determinate object—one copy is the same as another. But the original manuscripts, with their gaps and disagreements, are far more variable and discontinuous. The difference can be experienced by spending some time with a hypertext edition that permits the reader, with the click of a mouse, actually to see the manuscripts in their glorious diversity; happily, an excellent one is available for the *Book of the Duchess*, done by Murray McGilivray and listed in the Selected Bibliography.

Chaucer was himself quite aware of the danger of entrusting his text to the copying skills of even a trained scrivener, as he reveals in his excoriation of his own scribe in "Words to Adam, His Own Scribe," included here among his Short Poems. Errors introduced because of manual copying were only the beginning, however, as Chaucer also recognized, for English in the late fourteenth century was far from a standardized language, and change could be introduced even as a poem was "translated" from one regional dialect of English to another. As Chaucer writes fearfully of his great historical romance *Troilus and Criseyde*, "And for ther is so gret diversitye / In Englissh and in wrytyng of oure tonge, / So prey I God that non myswrite the, / Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge" ("And because there is so much variation / in English and in the way our language is written / therefore I pray God that no-one make mistakes in writing you / Nor foul up your meter due to [their] linguistic deficiency"; 5.1793–96). But variation was not limited to translation from one dialect to another. Such "mis-writing" and "mis-metering" occurred also because of changes in the spelling system, as inflectional endings were lost during the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, and as writers increasingly adopted the comparatively standardized spelling of administrative documents, known as "Chancery English." Patterns of immigration into London also liberalized the forms that were used there, and for much of the late fourteenth century "standard English" in London allowed for an unusual amount of that "diversity" of which Chaucer complains, making it nigh upon impossible for a modern editor to determine Chaucer's original spellings and sometimes word forms.

Again, this problem of reconstruction is more acute for Chaucer's minor poetry than for his major works, the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and*

7. These problems are explored by Norman F. Blake, in "The Textual Tradition of *The Book of the Duchess*," *English Studies* 62 (1981): 237–48.

*Criseyde*, as the surviving manuscripts are appreciably further in time from the author's originals, which he wrote, for the most part, in the early part of his career—the 1360s–1380s. Moreover, for all his brilliance, the Chaucer of the dream visions is in some ways an inexperienced, apprentice-poet, just developing the metrical repertoire that would carry him through the *Troilus* and the *Tales*. Not only is his meter likely more irregular than it would be later (whether from inexperience or as he experimented with novel metrical approaches to the four-beat line that he favored in some of his earliest poems); he is also more prone to reach back for a rhyme to archaic or remote forms. For example, he uses a Northern verb ending “es” to produce the rhyme “telles / elles” in lines 73–74 of the *Book of the Duchess*; the more standard form in London English, which he would adopt consistently in his later poetry, is “eth.”<sup>8</sup> In general, therefore, Chaucer's spelling and metrical practices are less predictable and harder to reconstruct in the early poems than in the later ones. On the one hand, an editor wishes to present the reader with a text that conforms to manuscript evidence; on the other hand, the manuscript evidence, in this case, is certain to generate spellings and forms that are unChaucerian.

This Norton Critical Edition offers a compromise by restoring some of the most obvious fourteenth-century forms, while remaining as true as possible to the substantive readings in the manuscripts. At the same time, while restoring spellings, I have no illusion that I am able to reproduce the specific repertoire of Chaucer's forms and spellings. I have lightly regularized these so that the inexperienced reader will not have to confront the extreme variability of medieval spelling. Although somewhat unusual, this policy is not fundamentally at odds with modern editorial practice. Virtually all modern editions of Chaucer, including my nineteenth-century copy-text, make many concessions to a normalized modern English, for example, by excising archaic orthography, distinguishing between *i/j* and *u/v* according to modern practice, and introducing modern customs of punctuation and capitalization. While I have punctuated this edition less heavily than my copy-text (in accord with the lack of punctuation in the manuscripts), I have accordingly retained and extended Skeat's normalization of spelling. For clarity, I have also kept his hyphen after the *y*-prefix before past participles.

Even so, consistency itself is not an entirely Chaucerian quality. Neither Chaucer nor any of his contemporaries had a stable, fixed system of spelling, of the kind a modern reader has come to expect. For all his complaints about the diversity of his language, Chaucer takes advantage of this feature, as I have noted, to produce rhymes that might only be possible in one regional dialect, but not in another. Scribes often underscored these rhymes by spelling them alike, making them “eye” as well as “sound” rhymes; this is a practice that I also have followed even when it has yielded a spelling that is different from other instances of the same word. In sum, decisions about a specific spelling amount, as always, to an act of editorial judgment; I have exercised such judgment in an effort to balance historical plausibility with the needs of the modern reader, for whom a consistent spelling system is a real convenience. The result, I hope, is a text that,

8. The example is provided by Simon Horobin, *The Language of the Chaucer Tradition* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 29. This book is an excellent resource for the student who wants to learn more about Chaucer's linguistic background and the state of current research.



while it may not match any single manuscript, represents a version that Chaucer and his readers would themselves have recognized and one that incorporates the best substantive readings available.

The second section of this Norton Critical Edition provides many of Chaucer's "Contexts." I might have called these texts "Backgrounds," but for a quibble discussed below. This section begins with the imaginative and speculative opening of Ruth Evans's essay "Chaucer in Cyberspace" (2003), which presents a fantasy version of Chaucer sitting at his computer, windows open on his screen to the myriad of texts that he would be drawing on as he created his own phantasmagoric mnemonic palace, the "House of Fame." My hope is that this picture itself reminds readers of both the differences and similarities between the textual culture of the Middle Ages and our own. Although Chaucer of course had no computer, he virtually (in all senses of that word) lived in a world of competing authorities, which he knew intimately and struggled to represent and reconcile in his art. They were as present to him in his memory as sources on the Internet are to the modern student.

This reminder should help make more immediate the relevance of the "backgrounds" that follow; these are not the spaces that stand *behind* Chaucer's art, the "background" against which his real interests are by contrast represented. Chaucer's sources—Cicero, Virgil, Boethius, Dante, Boccaccio, and others—are in a very important way the central subjects of his dream poems; their insights, confusions, and disagreements the very objects that he was trying to come to grips with in his art. In his Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer raises concerns about knowledge and authority: "What do we know of heaven or hell?" he asks provocatively; "nothing" by direct experience. We must, as he says, resort "to bookes [where] we finde / . . . olde thinges [that] been in minde" (17–18). Books, however, are subject to various and competing interpretations. In large part, then, Chaucer's dream visions represent an attempt to sort these out, giving special urgency to the written authorities that shaped his imagination. The interpretation of Aeneas's desertion of Dido offered by Ovid, excerpted here from the *Heroides*, is quite different from Virgil's explanation of Aeneas's dilemma in Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, also included. These are essential contexts for understanding both the *Legend of Good Women* and the *House of Fame*, where Chaucer rehearses that story from multiple perspectives.

In short, the Contexts section "teaches the conflicts" medieval-style. "Criticism," the third section, teaches the modern conflicts, for here we move forward to modern authorities on Chaucer who are themselves often in disagreement in ways that I think would have both surprised and delighted Chaucer. This part of the volume begins with a chapter from Charles Muscatine's groundbreaking study *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (1957), which puts some of the poet's sources themselves into context by analyzing the poet's characteristic turn to comic realism as he adapted the style of French and Italian contemporaries to an English idiom. In the next excerpt, the discussion of the *Parliament of Fowls* from A. C. Spearing's influential study *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (1976), the critical field of reference is expanded further, freeing Chaucer to move beyond the category of the literary to converse with the ancients on topics as varied as the nature of dreams to the order of society. As Spearing suggests,



Chaucer's concern with the relationship between nature and culture in the *Parliament of Fowls* is one of universal importance, encompassing even the insights of modern anthropology. At the same time, it is easy to forget that Chaucer, for all of his imaginative and intellectual freedom, exercised his poetic talent within the social constraints of a specific court setting, as R. T. Lenaghan reminds us in the third excerpt, "Chaucer's Circle of Gentlemen and Clerks" (1983). Lenaghan discusses Chaucer's relationship to his audience and his sophisticated narrative voice, as the poet negotiates social and political distance in some of his short, lyric pieces.

The next two essays—Richard Firth Green's "Chaucer's Victimized Women" (1988) and Elaine Tuttle Hansen's "The Feminization of Men in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*" (1989)—are imagined as a pair, taking opposed sides in the modern critical controversy over whether or not Chaucer intended the *Legend of Good Women* to be construed literally or ironically. Green argues eloquently from contemporary evidence that Chaucer straightforwardly resists the medieval double standard that cynically turned a blind eye to male duplicity as long as the victim was female. Just as powerfully, Hansen maintains that Chaucer's sympathy for the ladies in the poem is ironic and that his real interest lies in establishing a bond between men that reinforces their masculinity. Interestingly, while both Green and Hansen draw upon modern gender criticism, it is the male critic who focuses on and defends womanhood and the female critic whose interest lies in definitions of manhood. My hope is that these two essays will lead to interesting classroom discussion and student writing opportunities. The final piece of criticism is Steven Kruger's "Medical and Moral Authority in the Late Medieval Dream" (1999), an essay that focuses on philosophical and scientific theories of dreaming as they apply to the *Book of the Duchess*, ultimately connecting these again to the morbid and feminine passivity of the dreaming narrator in this poem. Kruger's essay thus links up with Hansen's by providing a different kind of gloss on the feminized male in Chaucer's poetry.

Both Spearing's and Kruger's contributions also place Chaucer's dream poetry within the important medieval genre of the "dream vision," perhaps the most popular literary form of the Middle Ages and one at which virtually every serious poet tested his hand. Perhaps the best known as well as the most complex and ambitious dream vision of the medieval period is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a poem that Chaucer clearly admired and imitated. Most simply, a dream vision is a literary text that recounts a narrator's experience of a dream or even a waking vision. But there were many different subgenres of the form during the thousand years of its popularity. The Boethian or "philosophical" vision, for example, based on a work that Chaucer translated—the *Consolation of Philosophy* by the late classical writer Boethius—confronted a grieving or confused narrator with an allegorical figure able to guide him out of his troubles. In contrast the love vision, a form popular with many of Chaucer's contemporaries, for example the French master of the form Guillaume de Machaut,<sup>9</sup> typically explored a love problem or situation without an obvious solution. The rhetorical purposes of the Boethian form—philosophical instruction and moral

9. Selections from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Guillaume de Machaut's *Fountain of Love* are included in this Norton Critical Edition in the Contexts section.

improvement—are thus in many ways incompatible with the courtly desire to entertain that characterizes the love vision.

Yet in the hands of a skilled writer like Chaucer, the two subgenres could be combined into a complex and pleasing new creation. Chaucer's most important early poems—the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* are all classic dream visions, but Chaucer worked within the form with considerable flexibility and independence. Not only did he marry the love vision to the Boethian or “philosophical” vision; he also brought an unusually light and often comical sensibility to the presentation of the narrator, and introduced a number of innovations that would influence his own fifteenth-century imitators—for example, a more elaborate frame before the dream section of the poem in which the narrator reads a related story before falling asleep. As the work by Spearing and Kruger also shows, Chaucer was able to build features of dream psychology itself, especially the conjunction of dream and imagination, into the visionary structure of his poetry.

In the last fifty years, there has been a great deal of excellent and thought-provoking modern commentary on Chaucer's dream visions and shorter poems, very little of which can be accommodated in any specific collection. I have tried to select criticism spread across several decades in order to give the reader a sense of the evolution of scholarly inquiry, which has taken a variety of approaches, from New Critical (close reading) to (New) Historical, to gender theory. In these essays, the reader can see the relationship of Chaucer's poetry to a range of influences, from French love poetry, to classical and Christian philosophy and science, to contemporary court culture. I also have chosen writings that focus on different texts, so that the reader should be able to find some discussion, usually by more than one writer, about each one of the major texts presented here. Muscatine discusses the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, and the *Parliament of Fowls*; Spearing the *Parliament of Fowls*; Lenaghan several of the short lyrics; Hansen and Green the *Legend of Good Women* (with Green also alluding to “Anelida and Arcite” and the *House of Fame*); Kruger the *Book of the Duchess*; and Evans the *House of Fame*. Space limitations prevent me from including criticism that touches on every part of each text presented here or on all of the individual shorter lyrics. The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, especially, has been a source of great critical controversy, as readers cannot even agree which of two versions of the Prologue has greater authority; although I summarize some of the issues in my introduction to that poem, unfortunately there was not space to represent the controversies in the Criticism section. The reader who wishes to go further is invited to consult the section of the Selected Bibliography devoted to the *Legend*.

Chaucer's “minor poems” are indeed dwarfed by the monumental accomplishments of the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. But these early poems have their own interest too, which goes beyond their foreshadowing of those later Chaucerian achievements. The pieces included here reflect their medieval origins in their use of traditional forms, but simultaneously they are highly experimental. In these poems, one sees used, for the first time in English, major metrical forms, like an

early version of iambic pentameter, and stylistic devices, like fast-paced dialogue, autobiographical asides, or the familiar ironic, self-deprecating Chaucerian narrator, predecessor of the unreliable narrator of the modern novel. The profound medievalism of Chaucer's poetry offers a glimpse of an earlier and much different world, but one that is seen through the eyes of an intelligent and detached persona who seems uncannily modern. In the dream visions and other poems, for example, we find many issues that still have relevance—the difficulty of accepting the finality of death, the vagaries of fame, the war between the sexes, the class issues involved in choosing a spouse, even the problem of getting by on one's pension—but reflected through a range of traditional poetic genres that were popular over six hundred years ago. These poems thus mediate between past and present and offer us entry to a world that seems at once forbiddingly distant and hauntingly present.

My thanks go to many helpers in the making of this Norton Critical Edition. The list must begin with the teacher who first introduced me to Chaucer, V. A. Kolve, whose lucid and elegant instruction provided an indispensable framework for understanding and a model of teaching I can emulate but never achieve. It must also include the wonderful Wellesley College students who have inspired me in my classroom over the years, and without whose curiosity and common sense I would not have known where to begin in choosing supplementary texts or in glossing Chaucer's language. Several student research assistants have additionally given me particular assistance at various stages in the preparation of this book: Jessica Mankus, Bijou Mgbojikwe, Simran Thadani, Adrienne Odasso, and Taline Boghosian. My thanks also go to the kind and capable staff at W. W. Norton, especially Carol Bemis and Brian Baker, and to the authors, translators, and publishers who so graciously allowed their work to be reprinted. I am grateful also to the patience of my family, especially to the trinity of father, husband, and youngest son, who have shared their domestic space with Chaucer more than was comfortable, but with hospitality and good cheer worthy of their guest.

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# A Quick Course in Chaucer's Language

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## Middle English in Historical Context

The history of the English language is conventionally divided into three periods. The first, "Old English" (or "Anglo-Saxon"), is the language of *Beowulf*, covering the period of English up to about 1100. The second, "Middle English," is the language of Chaucer, and extends to about 1500. English after 1500 is generally referred to as "Modern English." Just as the writing of John Updike or Toni Morrison is radically different from the writing of Shakespeare, Middle English evolved significantly over its four-hundred-year history. It was also spoken in a number of different regional dialects that could likewise diverge as dramatically from each other as the English of the British Isles today differs from that spoken in the United States or Australia. Chaucer wrote in the language of London, which itself evolved into standard English as we know it, making his poetry easier for modern readers than the Middle English that originated in other parts of England like the Northern or Midlands regions.

There are nonetheless many fascinating and complex grammatical and phonological differences between and within each of the three broad historical periods in the English language. A student wishing to learn more about these can consult the sources listed in the section on "Language, Recordings, and Editing," in the Selected Bibliography at the end of this Norton Critical Edition. Indeed, it is my hope that acquaintance with the beauty of Chaucer's poetry will spark the interest of students, prompting them to go further in studying the language in which his poems were written. The standard editions of Chaucer's complete works, such as the *Riverside* or others listed in the Selected Bibliography, also include useful introductions to Chaucer's Middle English. This Norton Critical Edition does not attempt to duplicate these more comprehensive treatments, and the information offered in this "quick course" should not be mistaken for full understanding.

Fortunately, though, unlike Old English (which is truly a foreign language to the speaker of Modern English), Middle English can be understood without comprehensive grammatical instruction. The extensive glossing in this edition should reduce the immediate need for such instruction; the reader will quickly pick up such differences as are found, for example, in the pronoun system (where one pronoun "hir(e)" does double duty for both "her" and "their" and "his" for "his" and "its"). A few additional tips to help get started: Middle English word order can be a little tricky, for the object precedes the verb much more frequently than in Modern English, or the verb may be separated from the subject by other

kinds of modifying phrases (as in line 95 of the *Book of the Duchess*—"Such sorrow this lady to herself took"). Several rules of Modern English do not apply to Middle English. Verb tense, for example, is often inconsistent. Also, rather than canceling itself out, the double negative has the rhetorical effect of intensification; for example, *Legend of Good Women* 5-8—"ther nis noon dwelling in this contree / that either hath in heven or helle y-be"—would be translated in modern English "there is nobody who dwells in this country / who has been in hell or heaven" rather than literally "there is not nobody. . . ." The lack of modern punctuation in medieval manuscripts should also be kept in mind, as phrases and clauses frequently refer forward as well as backward in a much more flexible construction of meaning than we are accustomed to in Modern English texts.

## Pronunciation of Vowels and Consonants

Even a student reading silently should be trying to "hear" the poetry in Chaucer's verse. Otherwise, the experience of Chaucer will be regrettably incomplete. Reading Chaucer aloud does require a little special training. While a full appreciation of the differences between the sounds of Modern and Middle English is a matter for years of study, the beginning reader willing to make a small investment of time can make a start without too much difficulty. The biggest difference between the sound system of Modern English and that of Middle English comes in the vowels, for over the course of the fifteenth century a linguistic event known as "The Great Vowel Shift" gradually but profoundly altered the value of the "long vowels" in English. Because the long vowels shifted their value in a systematic way, we can approximate Chaucer's original pronunciation by working "backward" from the long vowel sounds of Modern English to reconstruct their predecessors in Middle English. Happily, since most of the "short vowels" did not change significantly, there are a relatively limited number of sound changes that the modern reader needs to master.

Most Middle English consonants also are not considerably different from those in Modern English. Notably, however, consonants that are silent in Modern English *were* pronounced in Middle English, with the exception of the "gn" in French loan words. Thus, in the word "know," the "k" sound is pronounced in Middle English, but in the word "sign," the "g" sound is nasalized as in French but not pronounced. Also silent in French loan words, and in some common short Middle English words, is initial "h," as in "honour" or "his." In contrast, the consonant combination "gh" is pronounced as a guttural similar to the German "ich" (there is no Modern English equivalent), and the Middle English "r" is trilled. Also pronounced in Middle English was the final "e" (pronounced "uh" as in the first and last syllables of "America," and called by linguists a "schwa") at the end of a line of poetry or when needed for meter. A final "e" is generally required by the meter as an unstressed syllable to complete an iambic foot. For example, in line 4 of the *Parliament of Fowls*, transcribed below, a final "e" would not be required in the words "mene" or "Love," because the regular ten-syllable line of iambic pentameter is complete without additional syllables; nor would a final "e" be required at the end of this line,

where it is not written in the word “feling.” In contrast, in the first line of the *Legend of Good Women* (“A thousand tymes have I herd men telle”), the “e” in “tymes” *would* be pronounced, to fill out the meter, as would the final “e” as written at the end of the line.

## Table of Sound Changes

In the interests of simplicity, I have listed in the table below *only* those vowels that differ significantly between Middle and Modern English. For convenience, I have also included diphthongs (vowel sounds that glide between two different values). Unlike most such charts, this one puts Modern English on the left side, so that the student can work back from the speech values that he or she already knows. This table should be viewed as a study aid. It does not pretend to cover all the finer nuances of Middle English pronunciation. Again, the reader is directed to the sources in the Selected Bibliography at the end of this Norton Critical Edition. Especially useful are recordings of professional scholars reading Chaucer aloud, like those produced by The Chaucer Studio (and included in the Selected Bibliography).

### Vowel Sound Changes, Working “Backward” from Modern to Middle English

Modern English Sound	Modern English Spelling	Middle English Spelling	Middle English Sound
a, as in “cat,” “after”	a	a	“not,” “hot” (American)
a, as in “fame,” “wake”	a	a, [aa]	“fall,” “father”
a, as in “day,” “they”	ai, ay, ei, ey	ai, ay, ei, ey	between “day” and “die”
aw, as in “law,” “cause”	au, aw	au, aw	“house,” “town”
e, as in “sweet”	e, ee, ie	e, e, [ie]	“wake,” “break”
i, as in “I,” “tile”	i, y	i, y	“feet,” “be”
o, as in “loan,” “go”	o, oa	o, oo	“trod,” “saw”
o, as in “do,” “boot”	o, oo	o, oo	“doe,” “boat”
ow, as in “how,” “round”	ou, ow	ou, ow	“too,” “moon”

In addition to the major changes listed above, several more subtle changes and features should be noted and observed when possible. In general, even the short vowels in Middle English are slightly more open than those in Modern English, so that the word “but” rhymes with “put” (as opposed to “putt”) and the word “tongue” rhymes with “song.” Middle English is also influenced more strongly than Modern English by the

French “u,” as in recent loan-words like “vertu.” “U” is also lightly pronounced in some “eu,” “ew” glides (e.g., “fewe,” “lewed,” “shewe,” and “shrewe”) and “ou,” “ow” (in words that do not have the Modern English “ow” sound). Bracketed spellings in the table are those not represented in this edition.

### Opening Verse of the *Parliament of Fowls* Represented Phonetically

This phonetic transcription follows the verse in its original spelling. Spellings in the transcription are designed to approximate Modern American Pronunciation while avoiding the International Phonetic alphabet as unfamiliar to many students; the result should be a rough approximation of Middle English. This exercise is meant to get a student started quickly with the important experience of feeling the language in mouth and ear, not to replace listening to tapes and studying other sources to improve language performance. The “o” in the words “so” and “sore” should be slightly relaxed, between Modern English “so” and “saw”; italicized “r” is a reminder to trill. Through the following online link to Francis De Vries reading this verse for the Chaucer Studio, a student can find a quick point of reference and comparison: <<http://english.byu.edu/chaucer/early.htm>>

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,  
Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquering,  
The dredful joy alwey that slit so yerne,  
Al this mene I by Love, that my feling  
Astonyeth with his wonderful werkyng  
So sore ywis that whan I on him thinke  
Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or sinke.

The leef so shorrt, the crroft so long toe lerrn-uh,  
Thassaiy so harrd, so sharrp the konkwerring,  
The drredful joy alwaiy thot slit so yerrn-uh,  
Al this main Ee bee Lov, thot mee failing  
Astonyeth with is wonderrful werrking  
So sorr ee-wiss thot whan Ee on im think-uh  
Not wot Ee wel wherr thot Ee flait or sink-uh.



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