

Middle English Exercise 5: Pronunciation

We started out by ignoring, as much as possible, differences in pronunciation between Middle and Modern English and reading aloud the passages of Middle English according to how the words would sound if they were actually written in Modern English. Doing so allows us to divorce ourselves somewhat from the highly visual nature of our modern relationship to language, so that we might not emphasize superficial (orthographic) differences between the two, and thus understand more of Middle English than we would at first expect to be able to.

Now, however, in order to appreciate some of the poetic beauty of Middle English poetry, we will work on replicating as much as possible the sound of Middle English to a native speaker.

The pronunciation of Middle English differs in two key ways from Modern English:

No letters seem to have been “silent”

The vowel sounds are closer to those of present day Continental European languages than they are to Modern English

The first of these is simply a quirk of Middle English (from our perspective) that affects only a small number of words. For instance, *know* would have both *k* and *n* sounds at the beginning of it. Similarly, through most of the Middle English period, the *e* that you see at the end of a word (as in *knave*) will be pronounced, as well, rather than left silent. This *e* sound is the schwa sound, as in the *a* in *about*. On another front, *gh* was pronounced with a guttural sound.

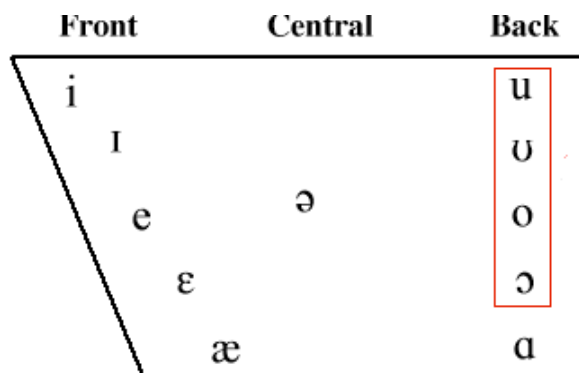
The second of the ways ME sounds quite different from ModE is the result of a significant change that affects very nearly every word: The Great Vowel Shift (GVS).

This phrase describes a dramatic *sound change* in the development of Modern English: the movement from the Continental pronunciation of the long vowels that we see in Middle English to the idiosyncratically English pronunciation that strongly marks Modern English. The Middle Ages experienced much but not all of this shift; some of it extended into the Early Modern period.

Unfortunately, in order to understand the Great Vowel Shift, you need to have some understanding of phonetics and the phonetic alphabet. Some of you might have acquired this already (from History of the English Language, Modern Grammar, a linguistics class, or elsewhere), but for most of you this will be completely new material. So, before leaping into a discussion of the GVS, take a look at the way the vowel sounds English uses are represented according to the phonetic alphabet:

[ɑ]	father	[ɑɪ]	line
[a]	French la	[ɔɪ]	boy
[ɒ]	hot (in England)	[ɑʊ]	house
[æ]	mat		
[ɛ]	met		
[e]	mate		
[ɪ]	sit		
[i]	meat		
[ɔ]	law		
[o]	note		
[ʊ]	book		
[u]	boot		
[ə]	above		
[y]	French tu		

The vowels are described by the shape of the jaw (closed or open) and the location of the resonance of the sound within the mouth's cavity. The image below, called the vowel trapezoid, is used to represent the location, within that cavity, of the vowels. Imagine that you are looking at the side of a person's head, as they make a given vowel sound, as their mouth is somewhat open. "Front" refers to the part of the mouth near the lips, while "Back" refers to the region near the epiglottis.



[adapted from www.utexas.edu/courses/linguistics/resources/phonetics/vowelmap/voweltrap10.gif]

In the fifteenth century, the long vowels gradually came to be pronounced with an increased elevation of the tongue and closing of the mouth (in other words, the vowels shifted upwards); the vowels that could be raised were (a, e, ɛ, o, ɔ), and those that couldn't be raised without becoming consonantal (i, u) became diphthongs.

This transformation took place in 8 distinct steps, which happened gradually.

Most of the long vowels had acquired this new pronunciation at least by 1500, probably earlier. Since this original period of shift, [e:] has raised even further (from the late seventeenth century to mid-eighteenth) to [i:]: from [kle:n] (of Shakespeare's day) to [kli:n].

It is important to remember the following:

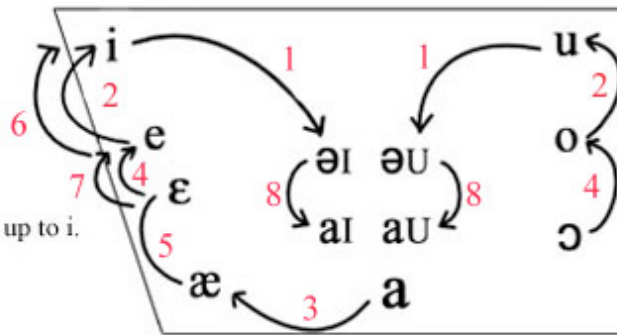
[. . .] the change affects only long, stressed vowels. The "y" in Middle English "my" was affected because it has primary stress, and we say /mai/; the "y" in a word like "only" was not affected (the primary stress is on the first syllable and -ly lacks stress, so we say /li:/, making the -ly of "only" rime with "see.")¹

As a result of the GVS,

- vowel length (in the OE sense of duration) is no longer meaningful (i.e. phonemic) in English; and
- our spelling system, which was being systematized before the GVS, no longer suits our pronunciation.

The following image comes from <http://alpha.furman.edu/~mmenzer/gvs/what.htm>, copyright Melinda J. Menzer, 2000. (I highly recommend you visit Menzer's Great Vowel Shift site hosted at Furman University; the "Dialogue: Conservative and Advanced Speakers" page is especially helpful; you can hear an exchange as it would've sounded at different stages, before, during, and after the vowel shift. The address for this is: <http://alpha.furman.edu/~mmenzer/gvs/dialogue.htm>)

- Step 1: i and u drop and become əɪ and əʊ
- Step 2: e and o move up, becoming i and u
- Step 3: a moves forward to æ
- Step 4: ε becomes e, ɔ becomes o
- Step 5: æ moves up to ε
- Step 6: e moves up to i
- Step 7: ε moves up to e
- Step 8: əɪ and əʊ drop to aɪ and aʊ



¹ Taken from the Great Vowel Shift page of the Harvard Geoffrey Chaucer Page at <http://icg.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/vowels.html>

The following are examples of words containing the long vowels (the length of the vowels is indicated by : in the phonetic transcription] undergoing the steps listed above.

Step 1:	five [fi:və] > [fəIv]	house [hu:s] > [həʊs]	(early 15c.)
Step 2:	sweet [swe:tə] > [swi:t]	root [ro:tə] > [ru:t]	(by 1500)
Step 3:	name [nɑ:mə] > [næ:m]		(begins before 1500)
Step 4:	clean [klɛ:n ʊ] > [kle:n]	bone [bɔ:n] > [bo:n]	(16c. – late 17c.)
Step 5:	name [næ:m] > [nɛ:m]		(1650)
Step 6:	clean [kle:n] > [kli:n]		(end of 17c.)
Step 7:	name [nɛ:m] > [ne:m]		(rare before 1650)
Step 8:	five [fəIv] > [faIv]	house [həʊs] > [haʊs]	(1600-18c.)

Practice

Given the following words in PDE, and based on what the various charts on the previous page demonstrate, determine the pronunciation of the vowel in ME. You will see the common ME spelling of the word following it, in italics, for reference.

life	<i>lyf, lif</i>
meet	<i>meten</i>
meat	<i>mete</i>
take	<i>taak</i>
how	<i>how</i>
mood	<i>mo(o)d</i>
home	<i>ho(o)m</i>

Now, take a stab at reading the following passages aloud, focusing especially on the pronunciation issues raised in Exercise 5. Don't worry about meaning; simply pay attention to how best to utter the sounds of the words.²

² These excerpts were all extracted from Elaine Treharne's *Old and Middle English: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

From *King Horn*:

Alle heo ben blyþe
þat to my song ylyþe
A song Ychulle ou singe
Of Allof þe gode kynge.
King he was by weste
þe whiles hit yleste.

From *Piers Plowman*

In a somer seson, whan softe was þe sonne,
I shoop me into shroudes as I sheep were,
In habite as an heremite unholy of werkes,
Wente wide in þis world wonders to here.
Ac on a May morwenyng on Malverne hilles
Me bifel a ferly, of Fairye me þoʒte.

From "Alysoun"

An hendy hap Ichabbe yhent,
Ichot from hevene it is me sente;
From alle wymmen mi love is lent,
Ant lyht on Alysoun.

From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

þus in Arthurus day þis aunter bitidde,
þe Brutus bokez þerof beres wyttensse.
Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, boʒed hider first,
After þe segge and þe asaute watz sesed at Troye.