

Reading Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

The meter of the *Canterbury Tales* resembles iambic pentameter, a style of rhythmic speaking that has become very popular in English language poetry and other types of oration. Because there are no recordings of anyone reading Chaucer's poetry in the 14th century, we cannot be certain of exactly how the stress occurred in the lines, but we can make educated guesses.

What is iambic pentameter?

An 'iamb' is a unit of spoken language (known as a 'foot') with one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, like **balloons**. Some people believe this is a preferred stress pattern for poetry because it sounds like a human heart beat (da DUM). 'Pentameter' means that there are five ('penta') iambs, so ten syllables altogether, in this pattern:

x / x / x / x / x /
da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

“From ev(e)ry mountainside, let freedom ring.”—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Notice that the center 'e' in “every” is surrounded by parentheses. This means it is elided or resolved and is usually not pronounced. Count the syllables with and without the 'e'. Which do you prefer?

Analyzing the General Prologue

Read each line aloud using the Middle English pronunciation you learned. Listen for the stresses. If you don't agree with the suggested stresses, write your own beneath the line. After each line, indicate how many syllables are pronounced (exclude the (e)'s) and how many stresses are in each line. If you notice that Chaucer breaks the rules (e.g., line 18), discuss why.

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|---|--|-------------------------|
| 1 | Whán that Áprill wíth his shóures sóote | Syllables:
Stresses: |
| 2 | The dróght(e) of Márch hath pérceð tó the róote, | Syllables:
Stresses: |
| 3 | And báthed év(e)ry véyn(e) in swích licóur | Syllables:
Stresses: |
| 4 | Of wích vertú engéndred ís the flóur; | Syllables:
Stresses: |

5	Whan Zéphirús éek wíth his swéete bréeth	Syllables: Stresses:
6	Inspíred háth in év(e)ry hólt and héeth	Syllables: Stresses:
7	The téndre cróppes, ánd the yóng(e) sónn(e)	Syllables: Stresses:
8	Hath ín the Rám his hálf cours yrónn(e),	Syllables: Stresses:
9	And smále fów(e)les máken mélodýe,	Syllables: Stresses:
10	That slépen ál the nýght with ópen ýe	Syllables: Stresses:
11	(So príketh hem Natúr(e) in hír coráges),	Syllables: Stresses:
12	Thanne lóngen fólk to góon on pílgrimáges,	Syllables: Stresses:
13	And pálm(e)res fór to séken stráunge stróndes,	Syllables: Stresses:
14	To férne hálwes, kówth(e) in sóndry lóndes;	Syllables: Stresses:
15	And spéciallý from évery shíres énd(e)	Syllables: Stresses:
16	Of Éngelónd to Cáunterb(u)rý they wénd(e),	Syllables: Stresses:
17	The hóoly blísful mártir fór to séke,	Syllables: Stresses:
18	That hém háth hólpén whán that théy were séeke.	Syllables: Stresses: