

Tips & Tricks for Pronouncing Middle English

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Consonants

Most Middle English consonants sound the same as Modern English consonants. Huzzah! When you're pronouncing consonants, SAY ALL OF THEM (like the French knights in *Monty Python & the Holy Grail*)! Yes, even pronounce those letters that have become silent in Modern English – e.g. consonants in a cluster: *half, folk, gnaw, knife, write, knight*.

Here are the consonants to watch out for:

When you see...	Think of Modern English...	Some Middle English words...
ch	ch urch	chivalrie, chirche, recche
gg*	g gg	pigge
gg*	j udge	segge
ʒ*, gh	[we need German here: ich]	hyʒt, nyght
gn	g nostic	gnawe
kn	ackn owledge	knyght, knife
lf	el f	half
r	[we need Spanish here: romero - flip the <i>r</i> if you can!]	shoures
s	hiss [not his]	sawe
sch, x*	sh all	schelde, xall [only in Midlands dialect]
þ*	th ink	sooþe
þ*	th em	syþen, þis
wr	j ury [flip the <i>r</i> if you can!]	wroth, write
wh	Cool Wh ip [a la Family Guy]	when
x*	ax e	axen
y*, ȝ*	y et	ʒonge, yow

n.b. letters with an * have more than one pronunciation.

One noteworthy exception, because it appears everywhere: -cioun is pronounced *see-oon*. Exs: affecciuon, excommunicacioun, pronunciacioun.

Vowels

The real trick to pronouncing quality Middle English is in the vowels. Like Modern English, Middle English has “short vowels,” “long vowels,” and “diphthongs” (two vowel sounds that have been smooshed together to make one).

How can you tell the difference? This partly comes with experience, but the main thing to remember is that the general rhythm of English—which syllables are stressed or emphasized in any given word, phrase, or sentence—hasn’t changed too much since the Middle English period.

You usually see a “short vowel” in an *unstressed* syllable, and they will usually sound pretty much the same as they do today. Many of them, in fact will just default to ə (aka the unstressed mid central vowel “schwa,” aka the most common sound in the English language).

BUT! The real fun comes with what we call “long vowels” and “diphthongs” – they have changed significantly since Middle English. You’ll usually find these in *stressed* syllables.

When you see...	Think of Modern English...	Some Middle English words...
a, aa	<u>f</u> ather	name, caas, at
e, ee	<u>f</u> ate	grene, sweete, be
final -e	so <u>f</u> a, lu <u>ck</u> y	face, take, knighte
i, y*	<u>s</u> eed	shire, l, ryden
o, oo	<u>n</u> ote	bote, good, to
u, ou*, ow*	<u>t</u> oo	usage, hous, fowles
au, aw	<u>o</u> ut	cause, drawe
ai, ay, ei, ey	<u>h</u> a + <u>h</u> igh	day, they, sayn
ew, eu	<u>f</u> ew [or Elmer Fudd’s <u>vewwy</u>]	newe, reule
ou*, ow*	<u>l</u> aw + <u>pu</u> t	thought, bowe
oi, oy	<u>j</u> oy	joi, point

One noteworthy exception: in educated and courtly circles where learning French was standard, Middle English words borrowed from French could lean pronunciation-wise towards Paris. This is especially the case with the u vowel in words like *nature*, *vertu*, which would be pronounced with the French u (close front rounded vowel).