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 ballōons. 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:

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  × / × / × / × / × / × /
  da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM
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“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.

1. Whánt Áprill with his shóures sóote

   Syllables:
   
   Stresses:

2. The dróght(e) of Márch hath pérced tó the róote,

   Syllables:
   
   Stresses:

3. And báthed év(e)ry véyn(e) in swich licóur

   Syllables:
   
   Stresses:

4. Of whích vertú engéndred is the flóur;

   Syllables:
   
   Stresses:
5  Whan Zéphirús éek with his swéete bréeth

6  Inspíred háth in év(e)ry hólt and héeth

7  The téndre cròppes, ánd the yónge sónn(e)

8  Hath in the Rám his hálf cours yrónn(e),

9  And smálé fów(e)les máken mélodýe,

10  That slépen ál the nýght with open ýe

11  (So priketh hem Natúr(e) in hír coráges),

12  Thanne lóngen fólk to góon on pilgrimáges,

13  And pálm(e)res fór to séken stráunge stróndes,

14  To férne hálwes, kówth(e) in sóndry lóndes;

15  And spécially fróm every shires énd(e)

16  Of Éngelónd to Cánterb(u)ry they wénd(e),

17  The hóoly blísful mártir fór to séke,

18  That hém háth hólpen whán that théy were séeke.