

**MIDDLE ENGLISH CONSONANT SOUNDS:  
26 in Middle English**

Linguistic Description	Mod. Eng. Example	Lower Articulator	Upper Articulator
<p><b>STOPS</b> (obstruents, plosives)</p> <p>bilabial: /b/ (voiced)           /p/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>alveolar: /d/ (voiced)           /t/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>velar:    /g/ (voiced)           /k/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>[Stops involve the complete closure of the air passage]</p>	<p>bill pill dill till gill kill</p>	<p>lower lip lower lip blade blade back of tongue back of tongue</p>	<p>upper lip upper lip alveolar ridge alveolar ridge velum velum</p>
<p><b>AFFRICATIVES</b></p> <p>alveopalatal: /tʃ/ (voiced)                   /ç/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>[Affricatives involve a stop plus a movement through a fricative position.]</p>	<p>Jill Chill</p>	<p>blade blade</p>	<p>far front of palate far front of palate</p>
<p><b>FRICATIVES</b> (spirants)</p> <p>labiodental: /v/ (voiced)                   /f/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>dental:       /ð/ (voiced)                   /θ/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>alveolar:     /z/ (voiced)                   /s/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>alveopalatal: /ʒ/ (voiced)                   /ʃ/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>palatal:       /ç/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>velar:         /x/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>glottal:       /h/ (unvoiced)</p> <p>[Fricatives involve constriction of the air passage.]</p>	<p>villa fill clo<u>th</u>e clo<u>th</u> zeal sill  rou<u>g</u>e sh<u>ll</u>  German <i>ich</i> German <i>ach</i> hill</p>	<p>lower lip lower lip blade blade front of tongue front of tongue  front of tongue front of tongue  front of tongue back of tongue vocal cords</p>	<p>upper teeth upper teeth upper teeth upper teeth alveolar ridge alveolar ridge  far front of palate far front of palate  palate velum vocal cords</p>
<p><b>NASALS</b> (nasal resonants)</p> <p>bilabial:     /m/ (voiced)</p> <p>alveolar:     /n/ (voiced)</p> <p>velar:        /ŋ/ (voiced)</p> <p>[Nasals involve complete closure of the oral passage with the nasal passage open.]</p>	<p>mill nill t<u>ang</u></p>	<p>lower lip blade back of tongue</p>	<p>upper lip alveolar ridge velum</p>
<p><b>LATERAL RESONANT</b> (liquid)</p> <p>alveolar: /l/ (voiced)</p> <p>[Air is expelled through passages on the sides of the tongue.]</p>	<p>lull</p>	<p>blade</p>	<p>alveolar ridge</p>
<p><b>MEDIAL RESONANTS</b> (semi-vowels)</p> <p>alveopalatal: /r/ (voiced)</p> <p>palatal glide: /y/ (voiced)</p> <p>velar glide:   /w/ (voiced)</p>	<p>rill yet will</p>	<p>front of tongue front of tongue back of tongue</p>	<p>far front of palate palate velum</p>

## MIDDLE ENGLISH LONG VOWELS:

Phonetic Symbol	Graphemes	Modern English Pronunciation Guide
/ɑ:/	a, aa	father (with relaxed mouth)
/e/	e, ee	swear; eh?
/ɛ/ (with a small tail curving on bottom)	e, ee	hay
/i/	i, y	see
/ɔ:/	o, oo	law (Round lips and laugh like <i>Sesame Street's</i> "the Count")
/o/	o, oo	boat
/u/	ou, ow	boot

## MIDDLE ENGLISH SHORT VOWELS:

Phonetic Symbol	Graphemes	Modern English Pronunciation Guide
/a/	a	hot
/ɛ/	e	bet
/ɪ/	i, y	bit
/ɔ/	o	law (with glide reduced)
/ʊ/	u, o	full
/ə/	e	but

## SOME ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE HISTORICAL SOUND CHANGE:

ME (Middle English) Word	Becomes . . .	MnE (Modern English) Word
<stoon> /stɔ:n/	→	<stone> /ston/
<spoon> /spɔnə/	→	<spoon> /spun/
<house> /husə/	→	<house> /haus/
<mete> /metə/	→	<meat> /mit/
<fete> /fetə/	→	<feet> /fit/
<wyfe> /wifə/	→	<wife> /wayf/

Note: These handouts are adapted from materials created by Professor James Boren at the University of Oregon. Any mistakes in the material are a result of my own errors in transcription rather than a product of his original work.

## SOME NOTES RELEVANT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

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### 1. EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE THAT /u/ > /au/

- A. /u/ + a labial consonant (especially the voiced and unvoiced bilabial stops /b/ and /p/) does **not** diphthongize. It remains /u/ and in MnE sometimes shows the spelling <oo> by analogy with the spelling of those words which in ME moved from /o/ to /u/. For example, ME <droupen> /u/ → MnE <droop> /u/. Cf. <loop>, <stoop>, <tomb>, and <Cowper>. (Two MnE words, <group> and <soup>, seem to conform to this generalization, but actually both of those words were borrowed from French after the Great Vowel Shift.)
- B. /u/ + /r/ + [consonant] remains /u/ and then lowers to /o/ much later--in some cases as late as the eighteenth century. For example, in ME <court>, <course>, and <source> are pronounced with /u/. (In some ME words, /u/ had already shortened to /ʊ/ before the GVS. Examples of this early shortening include these words: <country>, <plum>, <rough>, <southern>, and <thumb>.) The best advice here is memorize, but don't analyze.
- C. MnE <youth> and <uncouth> are probably Northern forms which did not go through the vowel shift common to more southern dialects of ME. In other words, these words in MnE are pronounced as they were in ME.

### 2. LENGTHENING OF OE SHORT VOWELS

- A. In ME, some OE short vowels lengthened before *mb*, *nd*, *ld*, *rd*, and *rth* (OE  $\delta$  or  $\beta$ ).

<i> + <mb> = /i/	ME example: <climben> (to climb).
<o> + <mb> = /ɔ:/ or /o/	ME examples: <comb> /ɔ:/ or <wombe> /o/
<i> + <nd> = /i/	ME example: <finden> (to find)
<o> + <nd> = /ɔ:/	ME example: <soond> (sand)
<ou> + <nd> = /u/	ME example: <sound> (to heal)
<i, e, o> + <ld> are frequently long vowels.	
	ME examples: <milde>, <yelden> (to yield) and <olde> /ɔ:/
<o> + <rd> = /o/	ME example: <woord>

No lengthening occurred if these consonant clusters were followed by another consonant. Thus we get the MnE pronunciation of /ay/ in <child> and /I/ in <children> because, only in the singular noun, OE /I/ had lengthened to /i/.

### 3. MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

- A. In a small number of English words (and for a variety of reasons), ME /ẽ/ > MnE /e/, **not** /i/ or /ɛ/ as would normally be the case in the Great Vowel Shift. Thus we have the MnE pronunciations of <steak>, <break>, <great>, and <yea> with an /e/, and their spellings clearly indicate that, in ME, they were pronounced with /ẽ/.
- B. The MnE word <great> was spelled in ME in a variety of ways: <gret> or <grete> or <grete> or <greet> or even <greete>. It was pronounced with /ẽ/. The comparative and superlative forms of this adjective were pronounced with the short vowel /ɛ/ and they were commonly spelled <gretter> and <grettest>. The change in the vowel of the simple

adjective prompted by analogy a change in the comparative and superlative forms so that today we pronounce all grades of this adjective with the vowel /e/.

- C. ME <golde> /o/ → early MnE <gold> /u/ → MnE <gold> /o/. This pronunciation is preserved in the family name Gould. In other words, the 14th and 21st century pronunciations of the long vowel in <gold> are the same, but the 16th and 17th century pronunciations of the word are different than either Chaucer's speech or our own.
- D. ME <Rome> /o/ → early MnE <Rome> /u/. Therefore, in the 16th century, Shakespeare's Cassius puns: "Now is it Rome indeed and Room enough, / When there is in it but one only man" (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.156-57). In MnE, the pronunciation was originally /o/.
- E. In two ME words, <breeches> and <seeke> (sick), /e/ → /i/ in the vowel shift and then later shortened to /I/. Resistance to pronouncing <breeches> with an /I/ has given rise to the modern phonetic spelling <britches> as a competing form in southern and Appalachian American dialects.
- F. Some French words borrowed *after* the Great Vowel Shift maintain the Continental (pre-GVS) quality of their stressed vowels. Examples: <machine>, <police>, <chemise>, <vase>, and <promenade>, which are pronounced today much as Chaucer would have pronounced them had they existed in his 14th-century English. In some American English dialects, the pronunciation of <vase> and <promenade> often conforms to the pattern /a:/ → /e/.
- G. In MnE, the association with <oo> with /u/ is strong enough to produce a "substandard" pronunciation of a word. Consider the MnE word <brooch> (ornamental pin or jewelry). The <oo> spelling has such a strong pull that many people pronounce it with /u/ rather than the "correct" /o/. That word in ME is <broche> /brɔ:çə/ and it means only a toy or plaything rather than jewelry.

## THE MIDDLE ENGLISH DIPHTHONGS

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ME /ay/ <ai, ay, ei, ey> → MnE /ei/ or /e/      ME examples: <daye>, <feith>, <peyne>  
ME /au/ <au, aw> → MnE /ɔ:/              ME examples: <taughte>, <drawen>, <cause>, <slaughter>

1. /au/ before /j/ or /nj/ → /a:/ and then MnE /e/ or /ei/  
ME examples: <gauge>, <daunger>, <aungel>, <straunge>, <chaunge>

2. In words like <laugh>, <laughter>, and <draught>, change is complicated by /x/ → /f/.  
ME /laux/ → /lauf/ → /la:f/ → /lae:f/

ME /oi/ <oi, oy> → MnE /oi/ or /ɔ:i/  
ME examples: <joye>, <boye>, <poyson>, <destroyen>

ME /ou/ <ou, ow> → MnE /o/ or /ou/  
ME examples: <soule>, <growen>, <blowen>

ME /ɔu/ <ou, ow, o> → MnE /ɔ:/  
ME examples: <foughte>, <broughte>, <soughte>, <doghter>

ME /iu/ <eu, ew, uw, iw> → MnE /iu/ or /u/  
ME examples: <fewe>, <lewed>, <shrewe>, <reule>, <trewe>, <knewe>

1. In French loan words, /iu/ appears as <eux, eau>.  
ME examples: <jambeau>, <beaute>, <depardieux>

2. This diphthong resulted from a late falling-together of earlier /eu/ and /iu/. It is possible that Chaucer still maintained the older distinction, i.e., that he spoke such loan words in the older French manner. If so, we might speculate that the <g> consonant in French loan words like *gentil* would be pronounced /ʒ/ rather than /g/, akin to Modern French <gendarme>. If not, the <g> would almost certainly be pronounced in a modern manner, akin to /j/.

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