

URE

Changes take place
to another. You are
our parents do and
a may have noticed
the pronunciation
t used today.
much more obvious.
noticed the changes
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tion would also have
enth century) strikes
English (sometimes
orman Conquest in
lly alien language, as
, will indicate:

Track 61

them talking, never-
historical evidence that's
we can derive a great
ng of *knight* indicates
. In addition, we can
ned where they don't
e while Pope rhymed
ll preserve older pro-
varieties. And, finally,
e phoneticians of pre-
e speakers or books to
amples was produced
persuade the Welsh to
analysing information
struct patterns of sound

English over a period
reconstructed English
William Shakespeare and

English pronunciation in the fourteenth century

Middle English: Geoffrey Chaucer (1345–1400) Track 62

*Whan that Aprille with hise shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in euery holt and heeth
The tendre croppes and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne
And smale fowules maken melodye
That slepen al the nyght with open eye
So priketh hem nature in hir corages
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
(from the Prologue to Canterbury Tales)*

'mɑn ðat 'ɑ:prɪl wɪθ hɪs 'ʃu:ɪrəs 'so:ɪtə
ðə 'drʊxt ɔf 'mɑ:rtʃ hɑθ 'pɛrsəd tɔ: ðə 'ro:ɪtə
and 'bɑ:ðəd 'e:vri 'vɛ:ɪn ɪn 'swɪtʃ lɪ'ku:ɪr
ɔf 'mɪʃ vɛr'tiu ɛn'dʒɛndəd ɪs ðə 'flʊr
mɑn 'zɛfɪrʊs 'e:ɪk wɪθ hɪs 'swɛɪtə 'brɛ:θ
ɪn'spi:rəd 'hɑθ ɪn 'e:vri 'hɔlt and 'hɛ:θ
ðə 'tɛndər 'krɒppəs and ðə 'jʊŋgə 'sʊnnə
'hɑθ ɪn ðə 'rɑm hɪs 'hɑlvə 'kɔrs r'ɒnnə
and 'smɑ:lə 'fu:ləs 'mɑ:kən mɛl'ɒ:di:
ðat 'slɛ:pən 'ɑ:l ðə 'nɪçt wɪθ 'ɔ:pən 'i:
sɔ: 'prɪkəθ 'hɛm nɑ:'tɪər ɪn 'hɪr kʊ'rɑ:dʒəs
ðæn 'lɔ:ŋgən 'fɔlk tɔ: 'gɔ:n ɒn pɪlgrɪ'mɑ:dʒəs
(Adapted from Cruttenden 1994: 73–4)

Even though the grammar was somewhat different and certain vocabulary items like *eek* 'also' and *holt* 'wood' may strike us as strange, the Middle English of the fourteenth century was perfectly recognisable as the forerunner of the language we speak today.

As you can see from the transcription above, the basis of the modern consonant system was already present in Chaucer's day. The most noticeable differences were the existence of the voiceless velar and palatal fricatives [x ç] (spelt **gh**) in words like *droghte*, *nyght* and the consistent use of voiceless /m/ in *wh*-words (e.g. *whan* or *which*). In addition, the English language is at this period rhotic. (You'll find all these features still present today in Scottish English varieties, which are the most conservative of modern regional accents. See Section C3.)

The fourteenth-century vowel system, however, would seem less familiar to us. Shortly after Chaucer's time, a massive change, known as the Great Vowel Shift, was to take place in the pronunciation of English vowels. Up till the fourteenth century, for example, many present-day FLEECE words (e.g. *sweete*) had the vowel [e:], while GOOSE words (e.g. *roote*) were said as [ɔ:]. Modern FACE words (like *Aprille*, *bathed*) contained the [a:] vowel; MOUTH words (e.g. *flour* 'flower') were pronounced