

Chaucer did not belong to any of the three traditional medieval estates, or social classes, mentioned in your textbook's introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer was a member of the middle class, a new development in society during his time. Chaucer was what we would call a civil servant, who served in numerous government posts for three successive kings. He was a soldier in at least one campaign of the Hundred Years' War, made several diplomatic trips to France and Italy, was a controller of customs on various products in London (that is, collected taxes on some imported goods), and was guardian to several minors. Through his various positions, he had contact with both the nobility and the common people. His unique perspective is apparent in his complex and nonjudgmental tales.



Geoffrey Chaucer

Your textbook's essay on Middle English includes a section on "Versification," that is, poetic elements. In addition, reread page x in the introduction for the steps in scanning a poem. You will be doing this task on your exams. We are also including here an additional look at scansion.

Scansion is a system for describing poetic rhythms or meter. **Meter** refers to the repetition of similar units of sound; each unit consists of two or three syllables with different patterns of accent and is called a **foot**. The box below lists the poetic feet most commonly used in English. You need not memorize these; you can refer to this list whenever you are reading poetry later in the course. Most, you will notice, consist of one accented or stressed syllable with one or two unaccented or unstressed syllables.

To discern the metrical pattern in a poem, we scan it, that is mark the stressed and unstressed syllables, divide them into feet, and count the number of feet per line. Unaccented syllables are customarily indicated with the symbol ~ and accented syllables are marked with '. Feet are usually separated by a vertical line, and the rhyme scheme is sometimes indicated down the right side. The number of feet is another aspect of the meter and is indicated by the prefix in the names for standard lines. Thus, **iambic pentameter** simply means a line of five **iamb**s (~ '). (Note that *iamb* is the noun and *iambic* the adjective form.) As your textbook mentions, Chaucer used mostly iambic feet, varied by the occasional **trochee** (' ~) and spondee (' '). Using all iambs—or all of any other foot—would be boring, lead to a singsong quality, and certainly not sound like speech. In addition, a change in meter can indicate an important point; the writer may change the meter to make something stand out and grab the reader's attention.

The General Prologue establishes the frame for *The Canterbury Tales*. A **frame** or **framework story** is a story within a story, with the frame setting up the telling of another or many other stories. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the frame consists of *The General Prologue*, which introduces the characters who will narrate the interior tales, and links between tales. Though the framework story form had been around for some time, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* was innovative in its use of such a diverse and memorable group of narrators. The *Prologue* and the links provide characterization of the pilgrims, and the tensions and arguments between them illuminate the tales while the tales add to an understanding of the pilgrim-narrators. In other words, the frame and tales are intricately intertwined. However, Chaucer as the overall

Standard Feet in English Poetry

		Examples:
iamb	~ '	devise
trochee	' ~	stable
anapest	~ ~ '	intercede
dactyl	' ~ ~	melody

Standard lines

monometer	=	one foot in a line
dimeter	=	two feet in a line
trimeter	=	three feet in a line
tetrameter	=	four feet in a line
pentameter	=	five feet in a line
hexameter	=	six feet in a line
heptameter	=	seven feet in a line

Long vowels in Middle English (here usually indicated by doubling, when vowel length is unclear by analogy to modern spelling) are close to long vowels in modern Romance languages. The chart shows some differences in Middle English long vowels.

Middle English	pronounced as in	Modern English
a (as in name)		father
open e (<i>deel</i>)		swear, bread
close e (<i>sweet</i>)		fame
i (<i>whit</i>)		feet
open o (<i>holy</i>)		law
close o (<i>roote</i>)		note
u (as in town, aboute)		root
u (<i>vertu</i>)		few

Open and close long vowels are a challenge for modern readers. Generally, open long *e* in Middle English (*deel*) has become Modern English spelling with *ea* (*deal*); close long *e* (*sweet*) has become Modern English spelling with *ee* (*sweet*). Open long *o* in Middle English has come to be pronounced as in *note*; close long *o* in Middle English has come to be pronounced *root*. This latter case illustrates the idea of "vowel shift" across the centuries, in which some long vowels have moved forward in the throat and palate.

Versification

All of Chaucer's poetry presented here is in a loosely iambic pentameter line, which Chaucer was greatly responsible for bringing into prominence in England. He is a fluid versifier, though, and often shifts stress, producing metrical effects that have come to be called trochees and spondees. Final *-e* is often pronounced within lines to provide an unstressed syllable and is typically pronounced at the end of each line. Yet final *-e* may also elide with a following word that begins with a vowel. The following lines from *The Nun's Priest's Tale* have a proposed scansion, but the reader will see that alternate scansions are possible at several places.

"Ȃvoⁱ," quod she, "fy on you, herⁱtelee^s!
 Allas," quod she, "for by that God abo^ve,
 Now han ye lost myn herte and al my love!
 I can nat love a coward, by my faith.
 For certes, what so any womman saith,
 We alle desiren, if it mighte be,
 To han housbondes hardy, wise, and free,
 And secree, and no nigard, ne no fool,
 Ne him that is agast of every rool,
 Ne noon avauntour. By that God abo^ve,
 How dorste ye sayn for shame unto youre love
 That any thing mighte make you aferd?
 Have ye no mannes herte and han a beard?