

Pronouncing Old and Middle English

This is only the barest beginning to a pronunciation guide, but it should help make samples of Old and Middle English more approachable. These pronunciations are 21st-century academic conventions. The actual pronunciation of Old and Middle English is irrecoverable; it can only be approximated. These are older versions of our own English, not "languages" with speaking communities aside from the people who study literary and linguistic history.

- In texts from both periods, *pronounce all letters*. Leave nothing silent.
- Pronounce most vowels as you would in Spanish or Italian: "a" as /a/, "e" as /e/, "i" as /i/, and so forth - in contrast to Modern English
- Old English offers a few other vowels. "æ" is easy enough; pronounce it /æ/. "y" (IPA /y/) is pronounced like /i/ but with the lips rounded, as in French "u" or German "ü." "ea" and "eo" are diphthongs; just run the two sounds together.
- Old English offers some unusual consonants. "cg" is pronounced /dʒ/. "h" in the middle or end of words is pronounced like German "ich" after a front vowel and like German "doch" after a back vowel. "c" is /k/ except before a front vowel, when it becomes /tʃ/. "g" is /g/ except before a front vowel, when it becomes like Spanish "ll." "sc" is /sk/ except before a front vowel, when it becomes /ʃ/. "p" and "ð" are easy, as they become "th" in modern English: pronounce both of them /θ/ most of the time but /ð/ between vowels.
- Double Middle English vowels ("aa," "ee," "oo") should be close to single vowels, but again as in Italian or Spanish (/a/, /e/, /o/). Middle English "ou" is /u/; Middle English /au/ is /ɔ/.
- Most Middle English consonants approach their modern values. "sch" is /ʃ/. "gh" as in "knyghthod," which becomes silent in Modern English, is pronounced like /h/ in Old English, hence in "knyghthod" it is like German "ch" in "ich."

Luke 2:4-14; Wessex Gospels, late 12th century

4 þa ferde iosep fram galilea of þære ceastre nazareþ: on iudeisce ceastre dauides. seo is genemned beþleem

5 (forþam þe he wæs of dauides huse. and hirede) þæt he ferde mid marian þe him beweddod wæs. and wæs geeacnod;

6 Soðlice wæs geworden þa hi þar wæron. hire dagas wæron gefyllede þæt heo cende.

7 and heo cende hyre frumcennedan sunu. and hine mid cildclapum bewand. and hine on binne aled. forþam þe hig næfdon rum on cumena huse;

8 and hyrdas wæron on þam ylcan rice waciende: and nihtwæccan healdende ofer heora heorda

9 þa stod drihtnes engel wiþ hig and godes beorhtnes him ymbelscean: and hi him mycelum ege adredon.

10 and se engel him to cwæð; Nelle ge eow adrædan. soþlice nu ic eow bodie mycelne gefean. se bið eallum folce.

11 forþam todæg eow ys hælend acenned. se is drihten crist on dauides ceastre;

12 And þis tacen eow byð; Ge gemetað an cild hreglum bewunden. and on binne aled;

13 And þa wæs færinga geworden mid þam engle mycelnes heofonlices werydes god heriendra. and þus cwependra;

14 Gode sy wuldor on heahnesse and on eorðan sybb mannum godes willan

Luke 2:4-14; Wycliffe Bible, late 14th century

⁴ And Joseph wente vp fro Galilee, fro the citee Nazareth, in to Judee, in to a citee of Dauid, that is clepid Bethleem, for that he was of the hous and of the meyne of Dauid,

⁵ that he schulde knoueleche with Marie, his wijf, that was weddid to hym, and was greet with child.

⁶ And it was don, while thei weren there, the daies weren fulfillid, that sche schulde bere child.

⁷ And sche bare hir first borun sone, and wlappide hym in clothis, and leide hym in a cratche, for ther was no place to hym in no chaumbir.

⁸ And scheepherdis weren in the same cuntre, wakyng and kepyng the watchis of the nytt on her flok.

⁹ And lo! the aungel of the Lord stood bisidis hem, and the cleernesse of God schinede aboute hem; and thei dredden with greet drede.

¹⁰ And the aungel seide to hem, Nyle ye drede; for lo! Y preche to you a greet ioie, that schal be to al puple.

¹¹ For a sauoure is borun to dai to you, that is Crist the Lord, in the citee of Dauid.

¹² And this is a tokene to you; ye schulen fynde a yong child wlappid in clothis, and leid in a cratche.

¹³ And sudenli ther was maad with the aungel a multitude of heuenli knyghthod, heriynge God,

¹⁴ and seiynge, Glorie be in the hiyeste thingis to God, and in erthe pees be to men of good wille.