How to Read Five Lines of Chaucer

To help you start reading Chaucer's poetry in the original language, here are just five lines of it. Read these lines through now, trying to make some general sense of what is going on:

> Now have I toold you soothly, in a clause,
> Th'estaat, th'array, the nombre, and eek the cause
> Why that assembled was this compaignye
> In Southwerk at this gentil hostelrye
> That highte the Tabard, faste by the Belle.
> *(Canterbury Tales, General Prologue*, ll. 715–19)

Even after just one reading, you have probably got the general idea: this is about some people being assembled somewhere. You have probably understood that the somewhere is 'in Southwerk' and that you are being told all this directly by the 'I' of the opening words: 'Now have I toold you.' However, other than that, much of the detail may have escaped you. What is it about the word order which is initially so confusing? What — or who — are 'the Tabard' and 'the Belle'? And so on. You have a fair general impression, but are not clear about the details. In fact, this is about as far as most people get without resorting to a translation or rooting around in the glossary. And yet, with just a little more educated guesswork, they could get much further on their own.

Here are three simple tips on how to turn Chaucer's English into reasonable Modern English. They will not solve every problem of detail, but they will solve most:

1. Go for the general sense first.
2. When words look familiar but are oddly spelt, keep the consonants, tinker with the vowels and drop the final 'e.'
3. When the word order feels odd, simply invert it and look for the subject.

If we now return to our passage, you will see how simple these three tips are to apply. We have already established the general sense (tip 1): some people are assembled somewhere. But who, when, where? Well, 'compaignye' and 'hostelrye' certainly look like familiar words but they are oddly spelt, so we should try tip 2: keep the consonants, tinker with the vowels and drop the final 'e.' That done, it is not difficult to recognize the modern equivalents of these two words: 'company' and 'hostelry.' Even if you did not know that 'hostelry' is an old-fashioned word for 'inn,' you could have guessed its meaning from its similarity to the modern words 'hostel' and 'hotel' and the immediate context.

So now we know that the passage is about a company assembled at an inn. And to know more about them we simply carry on applying tip 2. From the second line we know we are being told about their 'estaat' and 'nombre.' In context the former obviously has to be something like modern 'estate' or 'status,' while 'nombre' — at first so perplexing — just has to be 'number.' Note how constant consonants are, and how changeable the vowels. Likewise, when we drop the final 'e' of 'Belle'

we produce a plausible-enough name for an inn, and 'Southwerk' is only a vowel different from the modern 'Southwark,' the name of a district of London.

Initial problems with word order can be solved as easily. The first and third lines feel odd till you realize that subject and verb are coming at you back-to-front. All you need to do is to apply tip 3: invert the word order and look for the subject. This gives you 'Now I have told you' from Chaucer's 'Now have I toold you,' and 'Why this company was assembled' from Chaucer's 'Why that assembled was this compaignye.'

I hope you can see how easy it is to make sense of the text when you know what to look for and go about changing things systematically. In all these cases notice that all we are really doing is fastening on odd-looking but somehow familiar words, tinkering with the spelling and word order, and then seeing if the results fit in with the general sense. Admittedly, there will be times when you have used all three tips above and are still stuck for a word, and when that happens, you can turn to the notes and glosses. Words like 'eek' (meaning 'also'), 'soothly' (meaning 'truly') and 'gentil' (which means 'fine' or 'noble' rather than 'gentle'), should be glossed for you in the text.

Pope, Rob. *How to Study Chaucer*. New York: Palgrave, 1988.