

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

Department of English & Comparative Literary Studies

Medieval English Studies

A GUIDE TO MIDDLE ENGLISH

A Guide to Middle English

One of the aims of the course is that you should acquire sufficient knowledge of Middle English to read the medieval set-texts in the original language. Part of the examination for the course will involve translation from Middle English and commentary on Middle English texts, in order to test this skill. As you read through the texts set for the first term, consulting the notes and glossaries as you go, you will pick up most of what you need to know about Middle English. We shall support this with textual classes during the first term, in which we shall practice translation and work on the language of extracts from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Canterbury Tales*. The sections set for the language classes are listed at the end of this booklet. There is a valuable account of Chaucer's language in the *Riverside Chaucer*. The purpose of this guide is to bring together some basic information which will help you and to suggest vocabulary you might learn week by week. It doesn't aim to be exhaustive. Tutors would welcome comments and suggested improvements.

1 General

Middle English is what we call the stage in the development of our language between about 1100 and 1500. It describes the period between Old English (sometimes called Anglo-Saxon) and the beginnings of Modern English in the sixteenth century. The Middle English period was one of great linguistic change: the vocabulary grew by leaps and bounds, and the grammar of the language was transformed very fundamentally. Whereas Old English had been a highly inflected language (that is to say a language in which grammatical relationships were indicated by word endings) with a rather free word order, in Middle English, as in Modern English, many grammatical relationships are indicated by prepositions or by word order, which is in consequence rather fixed. Thus, while in Modern English 'speaks John Mary' is nonsense, in a more inflected language - in which John and Mary had endings to indicate their grammatical role - it would be a possible word order. In our course we are concerned with texts from the late fourteenth century and after, so the notes that follow naturally apply to that period.

Whereas surviving literary Old English for the most part conforms to the language of a single region (West Saxon), and modern literary English since the advent of printing has mainly conformed to a standard London English, in the Middle English period literature was produced in many different dialects. One of the reasons for the difficulty of the vocabulary of the plays lies in the fact that northern dialects of English absorbed more Norse words from the Viking invaders who settled there. The resulting northern dialects were less influential than southern, more French influenced, dialects in the creation of Modern English. Northern texts tend to contain more words that are unfamiliar to users of Modern Standard English than southern ones. As you might expect, dialect influences inflections as well as vocabulary. The notes that follow concentrate on Chaucerian forms (London and East Midlands).

These general issues are discussed in more detail in histories of the English Language such as R.W. Burchfield, The English Language (1986) chs 2-4, A.C. Baugh, A History of the English Language various editions, B.M. Strang, A History of English. Most of the examples below are taken from *The Knight's Tale* (cited by line number).

2 Inflections

These are changes or additions to words, usually endings, which provide information about number (whether a verb or a noun is singular or plural) tense or gender.

a) Verbs

In the present tense most verbs add -e in the first person singular (e.g. *I ryde*), -est in the second person singular (e.g. *thou sayest*), -eth in the third person singular (*she sayeth*) and -en in the plural. This can be summarized as follows:

	Middle English	Modern English
Singular	1 I telle	I tell
	2 Thou tellest	You tell
	3 He/She/It telleth	He/She/It tells
Plural	1 We tellen	We tell
	2 Ye tellen	You tell
	3 They tellen	They tell

The ending in -eth can also indicate the imperative (e.g. *Refuseth nat*: Do not refuse).

As you can see, Middle English retains more inflections than Modern English, but the system is simple enough. Old English had many more inflections.

In describing the past tense it is necessary to begin by making a distinction, which still applies in Modern English, between strong and weak verbs. **Strong verbs** form their past tense by changing their stem (e.g. I sing, I sang; you drink, you drank; he fights, he fought; we throw, we threw) while weak verbs add to the stem (I want, I wanted; you laugh, you laughed; he dives, he dived).

In the past tense in Middle English, strong verbs change their stems (e.g. *sing* becomes *sang* or *song*) and add -e in the second person singular (e.g. *thou songe*) and -en in the plural (e.g. *they songen*). Weak verbs add -de or -te (e.g. *here* becomes *herde*, *fele* becomes *felte*) with -st in the second person singular (e.g. *thou herdest*) and -n in the plural (e.g. *they felten*). The table below compares the past tense in Middle and Modern English for strong and weak verbs.

Strong Verbs

	Middle English	Modern English
	Present stem: 'sing'	
Singular	1 I sange (or soonge)	I sang (or sung)
	2 Thou songe	You sang
	3 He/She/It sange	He/She/It sang
Plural	1 We songen	We sang
	2 Ye songen	You sang
	3 They songen	They sang

Weak Verbs

	Middle English	Modern English
	Present stem: 'here'	
Singular	1 I herde	I heard
	2 Thou herdest	You heard
	3 He/She/It herde	He/She/It heard
Plural	1 We herden	We heard
	2 Ye herden	You heard
	3 They herden	They heard

The past tense can also be formed using the auxiliary verb *Gan* plus the past participle (e.g. *gan espye*: saw [KT, 1112], *gan knytte his browes*: frowned [KT, 1128]). *Gan* sometimes means 'began' in phrases involving the preposition 'to' (e.g. *to chaungen gan the colour*: the colour began to change [KT, 1637]) but even in some of these cases past tense is required (e.g. *he gan to holde*: he held [KT, 1506]). Some verbs add initial *y* or *i* to make their past participle (e.g. *ycleped*: called [KT, 867], *ikaught*: caught). Note also *For I it gan*: because I began.

B) Nouns and Adjectives

Nouns mostly add -s or -es for plural (e.g. *ladyes* [KT, 996]) and possessive (e.g. *Goddess love*: God's love [KT, 1084], but notice *spiritz*: spirits [KT, 1369]). There are no apostrophes in Middle English! (But modern editors sometimes add one to indicate that a letter has been elided [e.g. *th'onour*]). Some nouns add -en for plural (e.g. *eyen* [KT, 1796]). Although (unlike modern French or German) nouns do not take grammatical gender in Middle English, some nouns add -e for feminine. Some adjectives add -e in plural. Some adjectives are converted to adverbs by the addition of -e (e.g. *faire*: fairly [KT, 983], *hye*: highly [RT, 3981])

c) Personal Pronouns

The forms of the personal pronouns are somewhat different from those used in Modern English and are worth recording in full:

		Subject	Object	Possessive Singular
	1	I, ich	me	myn, my
	2	Thou, thow	thee	thyn, thy
	3masculine	He	hym, him	his
	3feminine	She, Ho	her	hir, hire
	3neuter	It, Hit	it, hit	his
Plural	1	We	us,	Owre, our, owres
	2	Ye	you, yow	your, youres
	3	They	hem	hire, here

Remember, in a manner similar to the use of 'tu' and 'vous' in French, the distinction between *thou* and *you* in Middle English often involves politeness and social relationship as well as number. Thus *thou* forms are used with friends, family and social inferiors, *you* forms with strangers or superiors. There are occasions when changes between the forms seem to indicate a change in the speaker's attitudes to the different people addressed, but in other places it is hard to detect any significance in the change.

3 Relative Pronouns

The main relative pronouns found are *that* and *which*. In translating *that* it is often wise to try out a range of Modern English equivalents, such as *who*, *whom*, *which*. The prefix *ther-* in such words as *therto* and *therwith* often refers back to the subject matter of the previous phrase. *Therto* may be translated as 'in addition to all that' or 'in order to achieve that'.

4 Impersonal Construction

With certain verbs the impersonal construction is quite common (e.g. *Ne falleth naught*: it does not befall, *wher hym list*: where it pleases him [KT, 1351], *hem leste*: it pleased him [KT, 1004]).

5 Reflexive Pronouns

Many verbs can be used with a **reflexive pronoun**, a pronoun which refers back to the subject (as in modern French or German) and which may, depending on the verb employed, be translated or understood as part of the verb (e.g. *dressed hym upward*: got up, *we shape us*: we prepare).

6 Extra Negatives

In Middle English extra **negatives** often make the negative stronger, whereas in Modern English double negatives cancel each other out. *Ne reccheth nevere* [KT, 1397] would now be 'doesn't care', *Ne no man shal* [KT, 2547]: 'nor shall anyone'.

7 Contraction

Sometime negatives and pronouns merge with their associated verbs (e.g. *nolde* [= *ne wolde*]: did not wish, *nyste* [= *ne wiste*]: did not know, *hastow*: have you, *wostow*: do you know).

8 Word Order

Middle English **word order** is often freer than Modern English, and in particular there is more inversion of subject and verb (e.g. *To the clepe I*: I call to you) or subject and object (e.g. *Unto hir reste wenten they*: they went to their rest [KT, 2490]. In analysing difficult sentences you should first locate the verb, then its subject, then the object or complement. (Roughly, a verb which involves activity takes an object - she hit the ball, he gave her the book - while a verb which describes a state of affairs takes a complement - it was yellow, you look better.) Then you should put these elements together. It should then be easier to see how the various qualifiers fit in.

In the long sentence (lines 893-899) near the opening the *Knight's Tale*, the main verb is 'was war' (897). My joining its subject 'this duc' and its indirect object 'a compaignye of ladyes', we reach the main clause of the sentence - 'this duc..was war.. (of) a compaignye of ladyes.' Then we can find places for the qualifiers and the explanations: 'When he had nearly reached the town in a state of prosperity and great pride, **the duke**, about whom I am talking, **noticed**, while he was looking around, **a group of ladies**, kneeling upon the high road in twos, all similarly clothed in black garments.'

9 Connection of clauses

Middle English often does not indicate connection of clauses as clearly as Modern English. In seeking to understand or in translating you may need to provide connecting words. On occasion you may have to provide verbs which have been omitted (particularly the verb 'to be' [e.g. *Hir filet brood of silk*: Her broad headband *was made* of silk] or verbs of motion) or regularize number or tense (in some Middle English sentences a subject can shift from singular to plural or a verb from present to past).

Chaucer can mix the past tense with the historic present (sometimes in telling a story we use the present tense, even though we and our audience know that the events occurred in the past) but a Modern English writer would have to maintain consistency at least within the sentence and usually within the paragraph as well. Chaucer's usage here (and with the implied words and the lack of connectives) may well be closer to spoken English than modern formal writing could be.

10 Change of Meaning

Although most of the words which Chaucer uses are still current (often with different spellings) in Modern English, some of them have changed their meaning. So it is a good idea to check the Notes or the Glossary even for words which look familiar. If you are interested in investigating the ways in which words change their meanings over time you can look at the quotations provided in large historical dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* or in R. W. Burchfield, *The English Language* (Oxford, 1985), pp.113-23, or G. Hughes, *Words in Time: A Social History of English Vocabulary* (Oxford, Blackwell). Here are some examples.

Middle English word	Meaning	Modern Equivalent
aventure	fortune	adventure
biddeth	pray	bid
caste	planned	cast
chambre	bedroom	chamber
debonair	meek	debonaire
estaat	place in society, status	estate, state
kynde	nature	kind
nyce	foolish	nice
pace	go	pace
speed	success	speed
sterve	die	starve
worship	honour	worship
wroughten	did	wrought

11 Vocabulary

Below I have made a eight lists of common Middle English words. These lists correspond to the extracts appointed for each of the eight translation classes. Since these lists are intended for learning by heart I have given single word glosses only.

The vocabulary of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is especially difficult so I have given more words than usual in the next few sections. There is a full glossary in J. A. Burrow ed., *SGGK*, (Harmondsworth, 1972), and in M. Andrew and R. Waldron eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (London, 1978; Exeter, 1996), which uses the Þ symbol for "th". If you are in doubt about a word in *SGGK*, try sounding it out.

1

uch	each
quat	what
hathel	man, knight
fele	many
sellyes	wonders, marvels
forthi	therefore
fayryye	supernatural, magic
demed	judged
athel	noble
freke	man, knight
stouned	astounded
steven	voice
hor	their
wyye	man
rekenly	politely
luflych	graciously, kindly
quyle	while
won	dwelling place
lede	sir
burgh	castle
burnes	men
stifest	boldest
carp	tell, say
seker	sure, certain
wyse	fashion, manner
gomen	game, sport
frayst	ask
innogh	enough
bide	receive, endure
bur	blow
felle	daring, fierce
fonde	try
lyghtly	quickly, readily
auen	own
elles	as long as

2

schyr
hals
segge
quy
trawthe
ayquere
cler
vylany
tulk
folde
melly
fong (pres.: fange)
hende
clannes
passes
fremedly
ferly
etaynes
dugthy
Dryghtyn
wrathed
plytes
red
felle
lyre
hende
auncian
schedes
gered
swyre
burde
lykkerwys
lyk

bright
neck
man
why
truth, integrity, honour
everywhere
bright, pure
discourtesy, wickedness
man
earth
battle
took, got
noble, gracious
purity
surpasses
as a stranger, exile
wonder, marvel
giants
brave
God
troubled, angered
difficulties, hardships
guide, advise
skin
face
noble one, gracious one
ancient one
falls, is shed
arrayed
neck
lady
delicious
lick, taste

3

slode
dyn
demly
style
kest up
semly
spelle
let as
sayned hym
sawe
quit
yeme
swythely
costes
mon
kennes

slid, drifted
din, sound
secretly
softly, quietly
lifted up
appropriate, fitting
speech, words
let on as, behaved as though
signed himself
prayer, words
white
eager
quickly
observances, customs
someone
teaches

iwysse
clere
quere-so
derf
thede
drurye
lel
lettrure
auntered
wenged
comlokest
elde
hetes
yonke
dille

indeed
lovely one
whenever
bold
land
love
loyal
learning, doctrine
ventured, risked
avenged
noblest, finest
generation, time
promises
young person
stupid

4

gome
cayres
halwes
layne
gruchyng
ilk
tulk
wele
wyrde
schore
leude
launde
meles
hyght
paraunter
mansed
forwarde
gayne
asay
lewté
greme
schalk
meled
larges
loghe
apert
egge
thrynges
sele
yare
yarkkes
bale
mused

man
go, ride
saints
conceal
crossly
same
man
good things
fate
ground
man
glade
speaks, says
promised
perhaps
threatened, menaced
agreement, covenant
winnings
test
loyalty
anger, resentment
man
spoke
generosity
laughed
openly
blade, sword
go, pass
good fortune, happiness
soon
grants, institutes
misery
doted, wandered in mind

The Canterbury Tales words. In many cases, because the context in which a word appears affects its meaning, it will be to your advantage to look particular words up in a better glossary, such as that in *The Riverside Chaucer* or N.Davis *et. al.*, *A Chaucer Glossary* (Oxford, 1979).

5

leste	pleased
wede	clothes
bifel	(it) came about
wroght	worked, made
highte	was called
quyke	alive
terme	duration
quite	repay, ransom
er	before
wone	was accustomed to
dight	prepared
priketh	spurs on
gentil	noble
pleyyng	amusement, pleasure
eek	also
ful	very
aventure	fortune
cas	accident
therwithal	with that
anon	immediately
up sterte	jumped up
yeven	given

6

verray sooth	complete truth
ay	always
dorste	dared
wight	person
for sothe	truly
hoote	called
kyn	family
person	parson
yaf	gave
mayde	virgin
estaat	social position
clepen	call
but if	unless
wolde	wished
algate	at least, in any event
wenden	thought
somdel	somewhat
savyng	except
catel	property
moot	must
happed	happened
stounde	time

lusty
sleighte

vigorous
trickery

7

tho
unnethe
woot
pardee
swynke
ther
sith
ech
artow
rowne
japes
feend
knave
outher
swich
shewe
assayed
housbondrye
thilke
bour

those
hardly
know
by God
work
where
since
each, every
are you?
whisper
jests
devil
churl, villain
either
such
show
tried
household goods
that, that same
bedchamber

8

clerkes
felicitee
wyse
out of doute
disporten
fresshe
dure
hap
biraft
yen
is woxen
brente
fayn
make
suffre
fyn
poure
yoore
leere
voys
spot
lewed

clerics, students, scholars
happiness
way, manner
without doubt
entertained
young, blooming
endure
chance
taken away
eyes, sight
grows, becomes
burned
gladly
mate
allow
end, aim
gaze intently
formerly
learn
voice
blemish, sin
ignorant

9 (more Chaucer words)

agayn	against, towards
al	although
alday	continually
alderbest	best of all
algate	in any case
bere on hand	accuse
bet	better
bihote	promise
boote	remedy
bountee	goodness
brenne	burn
cherl	common man
complexioun	temperament
curious	skilful, elaborate
clerk	scholar, student, priest
colour	excuse
corage	heart, spirit, sex-drive
conne, konne	be able, know
coy	quiet
curteisye	courtly, conduct, manners
defend	protect, forbid, restrain
delyt	pleasure, (esp. sexual)
despit	spite, scorn, insult
disparage	dishonour
disposicioun	arrangement
doute	uncertainty, difficulty, danger
daunger	disdain, resistance, power
deyntee	fine food, pleasure
depart	go away, divide
dight	prepare, go or penetrate
discreet	judicious, wise
dispence	expenditure
disese	discomfort
doom	judgement, opinion
drenche	drown
em	uncle
emforth	to the extent of
envye	resentment, hostility
ese	comfort, prosperity, success
fetys	graceful, well made
ferre	farther
founde	test, strive, try
forthy	therefore
fre	noble
gentil	noble, gracious
gentillesse	nobility, kindness
gree	favour, degree
grucche	grumble
grys	grey
hende	courteous, polite
hente	seize, gasp
him thoughte	it seemed to him

in hye	quickly, soon
joly	merry, amorous
kep	keep, heed, care
*kynde: (noun)	nature, kindred, species
large	ample, generous
likerous	lecherous, greedy
lite	little
luxurie	lust, excess
mede	reward
moot	must, may
mowe	may
mury/mery/myry	merry, fine, tuneful
neer	near
paraunter	peradventure
purveiance	foresight
quit	requite, pay, reward
rathe	early
*sad	stable, steadfast, serious, sated, sorrowful
sely	happy, innocent, simple, unfortunate
sentement	personal feeling, sensation
sentence	meaning
space	time, space
siker	trusty, true, certain, sure
sithen	after
skile	reason, cause, argument
sownen	lead to
spede	succeed, prosper
swich	such
talent	inclination, desire
thar/thurst	must, it is necessary
ther	where
tho	those, then
trowe	believe
yerray	true
*vileinye	shame, injury, boorishness
want	lack, be lacking
wisly	certainly, surely
withouten drede	without doubt
worship	honour
wot	know
wreke	avenge
wood	mad
wyrd	fate
yelpen	boast
yerd	stick
yfeere	together
ywis	indeed, certainly

Passages chosen for study in the textual classes:

- 1 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 231-300.
- 2 *SGGK*, 619-55, 713-39, 943-69.
- 3 *SGGK*, 1178-1207, 1476-1534.
- 4 *SGGK*, 2118-39, 2331-2428.