

WHY WORDS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH OFTEN LOOK DIFFERENT FROM THEIR MODERN ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS

MIDDLE ENGLISH: OVERVIEW

Middle English (ME) is the name given to the vernacular language spoken and written in England between (roughly) 1100/1150 and 1450/1500. Many words in Modern English (ModE) come from ME: it's the same *language*, just an earlier version.

ME developed out of the Germanic Anglo-Saxon (AS) language, also known as Old English (OE), augmented by words from Latin (L), Old French (OF) and the medieval Scandinavian languages (known collectively as Old Norse (ON)).

English had numerous dialects of English: variants in vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation. There was no standardization in spelling or way of writing: people wrote words down as they sounded. Chaucer knew that people from different regions used different terms and sounded words differently. In *The Reeve's Tale* he represents the clerks' north country speech through spelling and dialect words, for example:

'I have herd seyde, "Man sal taa of twa thynges:
Slyk as he fyndes, or taa, slyk as he brynges"'

(4129–30)

This is the earliest known example of a English writer conveying dialect in this way. Here, *twa* represents the north country variant of southern 'two' (cf. *bathe* for *bothe*, both, at l. 4112). The word *taa* (take) demonstrates regional use of the glottal stop. By Chaucer's time (c. 1400) the northern dialects had already shifted to an *-es* ending for the third-person singular verb form (precursor of ModE *-s*), but the south still used the AS *-eth* form: in Chaucer's London dialect, the north country *fyndes* and *brynges* would be *fyn-deth* and *bryngeth*.

SPELLING AND SOUNDING: OVERVIEW

In ME, all letters were voiced, where they are often silent in ModE equivalents. Thus, ModE ignores the first letter in *knight*, *gnaw* and *wring*, but in ME they were sounded; similarly, the final letter in *comb* and *damn* was pronounced in ME, as were both elements of compound consonants, such as *would* and *night*.

Some ME letters later fell into disuse. In Chaucer's time, these two consonant forms were still used:

þ (cap Þ): thorn, representing 'th' and based on AS spelling

ȝ (cap ȝ): yogh, representing AS 'g', sounded like 'y' in ModE 'young', and 'gh', pronounced like the 'ch' in Scots 'licht' and 'loch'.

Some editors normalize these to an equivalent ModE spelling, but other retain them, and knowing how they work aids understanding of ME. Compare *SGGK* line 69 in Burrow's edition to Tolkien and Gordon's:

Ladies laghed ful loude thogh thay lost haden (JAB)

Ladies laȝed ful loude, þoȝ þay lost haden (T&G)

(Note that the editors have punctuated the line differently: there is no punctuation in the manuscript.)

Final *-e* was also voiced (cf. medieval and modern French poetry), usually unstressed and sounding like 'uh' (called 'schwa' in linguistics), as in the final syllable of the word 'china'. So ME *loude* is disyllabic: *loud-e*. (Burrow removes many of these.) Editors often modernize spelling or insert an accent (*é*) where it's possible to relate the word to a ModE equivalent: thus Burrow shows ME *pite* (*SGGK*, l. 654) as *pity*, and Tolkien and Gordon show it as *pité*.

VOWEL SOUNDS: OVERVIEW

Native English speakers in different areas of Britain, North America, Africa, and the Antipodes pronounce vowels very differently. One reason that ME vowels sound different from ModE vowels is the so-called Great Vowel Shift (GVS), which lifted the earlier Latinate/French pronunciation of ME vowels. (For more details, see <<http://bit.ly/16G5u9N>> or <<http://bit.ly/15KM6LZ>>). This means that many ME vowel sounds are closer to their modern French or Italian equivalents: for example, the *i* in ME *fine* is sounded like the *ee* in *see*, and long *e* is voiced like ModFr *ê* (as in *bête*) in words like *lene*, *neeth* and *death*, or ModFr *é* (as in *thé*) in words such as *nede* and *swete*.

In ModE, diphthongs have a single value; in ME most diphthongs incorporate both sounds: the *a* and *y* of ME *day* are both voiced, so the word sounds like ModE 'die', while the *au* of ME *cause* is pronounced (Germanically) like the *ow* in ModE 'cow'.

FURTHER READING

Most editions of ME texts will include a guide to pronunciation, using ModE (or ModFr) words to offer examples of ME soundings. For a more detailed analysis (including the development of ME, its pronunciation, grammar, syntax, and use in poetry), see Part 1 of J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 3–72 (in the Warwick University Library (WUL): [PE535.B8](#) and [e-text](#)).

Further information, including manuscript illustrations, advice on reading and practising ME, links, and audio clips, can be found at <<http://bit.ly/19gXT1w>>.

EXERCISE 1: RECOGNISING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ME AND MODE – IDENTIFYING ME WORDS FROM MODE EQUIVALENTS

Delete words recognisable from Mode	Write leftover words here	Guess meaning from context
There was lokyng on lenkthe the lede to behold,		
For uch mon had mervayl what hit mene myght		
That a hathel and a horse myght such a hewe lach		
As growe grene as the gres and grener hit semed,		
Then grene aumayl on gold glowande bryghter.		
Al studied that there stode, and stalked him nere		
With all the wonder of the worlde what he worch schulde.		
For fele sellyes had thay sen, bot such never are;		
Forthy for fantoum and fayrye the folk there hit demed.		
Therefore to answare was arwe mony athel freke		
And all stouned at his steven and stone-stille seten		
In a swoghe sylence thurgh the sale rich;		
As all were slypped upon slepe so slaked her lotes		
In hye;		
I deme hit not all for doute		
Bot sum for cortaysye –		
Bot let him that all schulde loude		
Cast unto that wye.		