

TRANSLATION SKILLS: TIPS AND ‘BEST PRACTICE’

READING ME

- ▶ Read the summaries supplied in editions for an overview of the plot and themes before starting.
- ▶ Keep in practice. Do at least 15 minutes of reading ME (varying between *SGGK* and Chaucer) every day, including weekends and vacations. Keep studying ME when the seminars are over: translation skills and textual knowledge will both be needed for the examination, and both can fade quickly. Do not have to begin ME from scratch again in the revision season.
- ▶ For *SGGK*, compare other editions, and consult their notes and glossaries; look at online glossaries (see <<http://bit.ly/19gXT1w>>). Also examine definitions and example usages in the online version of the *Middle English Dictionary* (<<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>). This will aid understanding of how ME relates to ModE and other languages, and thus improve translation.
- ▶ Reading the text aloud can often help with meaning: these texts were intended to be read aloud, and many of the techniques used, such as alliteration and assonance, are targeted at a listening audience (Reading out loud cannot, of course, be done in an examination, but try to practise mouthing the words silently to aid in ‘hearing’ them.. This also helps with grasping poetics – rhythm, rhyme, speed, emphasis – and thus is also a useful method for lyrical poetry.)
- ▶ Identify the patterns of different spelling practices, especially with the use of vowels. Recognising how more familiar words are spelt in ME will help with harder or less familiar words.

- ▶ Consult *The Oxford English Dictionary* (online version available via [WUL](http://www.oed.com)), which shows etymologies (information on words’ origins and history) and examples of usage. This makes clear the relationship of ModE to ME and to other languages, and helps in understanding changing spellings and meanings.

TRANSLATING ME INTO GOOD MODERN ENGLISH

- ▶ Skim the whole passage or stanza to gain an overview of its meaning before starting the translation.
- ▶ Read each line carefully and thoroughly, and deal with every word. It is easy to overlook prepositions or short adjectives, but it costs marks.
- ▶ Beware mistaking ME words for their modern equivalents: for example, ME *hir* is ‘their’ not ‘her’. (Examining the context with a good knowledge of the text will clarify what is meant.) Most translation tests contain a potential pitfall like this...
- ▶ ME words that look identical to ModE words may well not have the same meaning (for instance, ME *buxom* means ‘obedient’ or ‘submissive’), or might have multiple meanings and the poet may be drawing on these for ironic purposes (so ME *lewd* – often spelt *lewed* – can indicate vulgarity or lack of chastity, but primarily means ‘uneducated’ or ‘ignorant’).
- ▶ Remember: translate, do not transliterate. Transliterating words into modern equivalents often results in unclear or inaccurate readings (thus *lewd* into ‘lewd’, above), or fails to demonstrate that the ME meaning has been understood (so render ME *mercy* as ‘compassion’ not ‘mercy’).

- ▶ Follow the punctuation provided by the editor: it’s intended to aid understanding.
- ▶ Apply logic: a goose that has been roasted (Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale*, l. 4137) is unlikely to reappear in the following line as an animal which must be tethered so it can’t escape... (Yes, someone did this!)
- ▶ Use knowledge of the wider text to inform the translation: the whole text should have been studied well enough to supply adequate contextual information to aid in translation.
- ▶ Since the translation is not in verse, it should be set out as prose, i.e. in paragraphs (flowing blocks of text), not line-by-line. Translation from ME often means changing the order of words, sometimes across two or more lines, in order to produce good modern English, which cannot be done in a line-by-line layout. Line-by-line translations are likely to produce stilted, unnatural-sounding readings, rather than naturally flowing and grammatically sound ModE.
- ▶ It is acceptable to render a colloquial phrase – for example, a cliché, idiom, or saying – with a modern equivalent, although it is advisable to follow this with a literal translation in square brackets [] to make it clear that the vocabulary has been fully understood.

EXERCISE 2: IDENTIFYING PARTS OF SPEECH AND TRANSLATING ME WORD ORDER INTO MODERN ENGLISH

ME word order often reflects its Anglo-Saxon (Germanic) predecessor: for example, the verb may be placed at the end of the clause, as in modern German. This order has to be adjusted to turn ME into good ModE. Pay particular attention to order in translating the following passage; also be alert to the similarity between the endings of third-person singular verb forms and of plural nouns.

1) Highlight the active verbs, noting how they fit into the syntax

2) Translate here, noting the changes that are needed to produce good modern English syntax

So many mervayl by mount there the mon findes

Hit were to tor for to telle of the tenthe dole.

Sumwhyle with wormes he werres and with wolves als,

Sumwhyle wyth wodwos that woned in the knarres,

Bothe with bulles and beres, and bores otherwhyle,

And etaynes that hym aneledede of the high felle.

Nad he bene doghty and drye and Dryghtyn had served,

Douteles he had bene ded and dreped ful oft;

For werre wrathed him not so much that wynter nas wors,

When the colde clere water fro the cloudes schadde,

And fres er hit falle myght to the fale erthe.

Nere slayn wyth the slete he slepte in his yrnes

Mo nightes then innogh in naked rokkes,

There as claterande fro the crest the colde borne rennes,

And hinged high over his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.
