UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

Department of English & Comparative Literary Studies

Medieval English Studies

A GUIDE TO MIDDLE ENGLISH

A Guide to Middle English: Introduction

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. In order to test this skill, the examination for the course includes some translation from Middle English as well as commentary on Middle English texts.

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. The purpose of this guide is to bring together some basic information to help you, and to list vocabulary you might wish learn week by week. During the first term, your private reading will be supported by textual classes, which include reading practice, translation techniques and other work on the language of extracts from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. (The sections set for the language classes are listed at the end of this booklet.)

The course is concerned with texts from the late fourteenth century and after, so the grammatical notes and vocabulary below apply to that period. The guide does not aim to be exhaustive. (Some suggestions for further reading on Middle English can be found below.) Tutors welcome comments on the guide and suggestions for improvement.

NOTE: If you are unfamiliar with the grammatical terminology used in this guide, you might find it useful to buy a grammar book, or borrow one from the library. The words used are the technical terms relating to grammar and language, and you will be expected to understand, and sometimes to use, them.

1 General

The term Middle English describes the stage in the development of the English language between 1100 and 1500; it falls between Old English (also 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 there were fundamental changes in the grammar of the language. Old English had been highly inflected (i.e., grammatical relationships were indicated by word endings) with a rather free word order. In an inflected language, both *calls John Mary* and *John Mary speaks* are valid options, because both *John* and *Mary* have distinctive endings to show their grammatical relationship (who is doing what to whom). In contrast, Middle English, like Modern English, uses prepositions (*John speaks to Mary*) or a logical word order (*John calls Mary*) to indicate many grammatical relationships, and in consequence the word order is more fixed.

Old English texts that have survived are mainly in the language of a single region (West Saxon); while, since the advent of printing, modern literary English has mainly conformed to a standard London English. In the Middle English period, literature was produced in many different dialects, which were influenced by different languages. Thus, Chaucer's English contains many more words derived from French and Latin than do the northern dialects, which retained a stronger Germanic influence from their Anglo-Saxon predecessor as well as absorbing many Norse words from the Viking invaders who settled in the north; and dialect influenced inflections as well as vocabulary. This means that northern texts, in comparison with southern ones, tend to contain more words that

are unfamiliar to users of Modern Standard English. The notes that follow concentrate on Chaucerian forms (London and East Midlands). Most of the examples below are taken from *The Canterbury Tales – The Miller's Tale* (*MT*), *The Pardoner's Tale* (*PT*), or *The General Prologue* (*GP*) – and cited by line number. It is useful to remember that there is no standardized spelling in Middle English, and a single text often uses variant spellings of the same word.

There is a valuable account of Chaucer's language in the set-text, *The Riverside Chaucer*; while more general issues of Middle English are discussed in greater detail in histories of the English language, such as R. W. Burchfield, *The English Language* (1985, classmark 420 (external store)), chapters 2–4; A. C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language* (various editions; 4th edn, 1993, classmark PE1075.B2); B. M. Strang, *A History of English* (1970, classmark PE1075.S8).

If you would like to develop your understanding further, you can find detailed information on Middle English and its grammar in J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English* (various editions; 3rd edn, 2005, classmark PE535.B8; and e-book).

2 Inflexions

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

a) *Verbs*

There are, of course, some irregular verbs; but most verbs in the **present** tense add an ending to the stem (*bind* in the following examples): *–e* in the first person singular (*I bind**e***), *–est* in the second person singular (*thou bind**est***), *–eth* in the third person singular (*she bind**eth***), and *–en* in all plural forms (*we/ye/they bind**en***). Modern English uses an identical form for the singular and plural versions of the second person, but they were differentiated in Middle English: singular *thou/thy* and plural *ye/you/your*. Middle English has more inflections than Modern English, but the system is simple enough:

		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 *–eth* can also indicate the singular imperative: *Refuseth nat* (Do not refuse).

With 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 the past tense by changing their stem (thus, *I s**i**ng*, *I s**a**ng*; *you thr**o**w*, *you thr**e**w*), while weak verbs add to the stem (*I wish*, *I wish**ed***; *you laugh*, *you laugh**ed***).

In the past tense in Middle English, strong verbs change their stems (so *s**i**ng* becomes *s**a**ng* or *s**o**ng*) and also add *–e* in the second person singular (*thou s**o**ng**e***) and *–en* in the plural (*they s**o**ng**en***). Weak verbs add *–de* or *–te*, so *here* becomes *her**de***, *fele* becomes *fel**te***; the second person singular takes the ending *–st* (*thou her**dest***) and plural forms taken *–n* (*they fel**ten**).* 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
	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 is often formed using the auxiliary verb *gan* with the past participle: *Absolon gan wype his mouth* (*MT* 3730) means 'Absolon wiped his mouth'; *The folk gan laughen* (*MT* 3840) means 'the people laughed'. Where *gan* is used with an infinitive verb (usually with the particle 'to'), it can 'began': so *he gan to crye* (*MT* 3814) means 'he started to shout'. However, frequently these cases also need to be translated using the simple past tense: *gan to rynge* (*MT* 3655) means 'rang'. The context should help you select the most logical translation. Some verbs add an initial *y* or *i* to the past participle: for instance, *ycleped*, 'called' (*MT* 3313); *ycrowe*, 'crowed' (*MT* 3357).

b) *Nouns and Adjectives*

Plural nouns are generally formed by adding *–s* or *–es* to the singular noun: *shoures*, 'showers (*MT* 3196), *lords*, 'lords' (*MT* 3581). Irregular forms appear occasionally; for instance, *The Merchant's Tale* offers *instrumentz* (1713). Note that possessives are formed in the same way as plural nouns – *the Kynges Noote*, 'the King's Tune' (*MT* 3217); *Goddes pryvetee*, 'God's secrets' (*MT* 3454) – and take care not to confuse the two. (There are no apostrophes in Middle English to show possession, although modern editors sometimes insert them to indicate an elision, e.g. *th' encrees* (*GP* 275)).

Some nouns add *–en* for plural, such as *eyen*, ‘eyes’ (*MT* 3317), and a few have the same form in the singular and the plural; for instance, compare *o thing*, ‘one thing’ (*MT* 3583) with *certeyn thing*, ‘certain things’ (*MT* 3494). There are also a few mutated plurals, some of which have survived into Modern English: thus singular *man* (*MT* 3450) mutates into plural *men* (*MT* 3491).

Most adjectives do not take a plural ending, although monosyllabic adjectives add *–e* to pluralize: *a yong squire* (*GP* 79), but *yonge women* (*GP* 213). In some circumstances an *–e* is added in the singular, such as when the adjective appears with a definite article (*the yonge sonne*, *GP* 7) or with a demonstrative article (*this yonge wyf*, *MT* 3233; *that ilke nyght*, *MT* 3584).

c) *Adverbs*

Some adjectives are converted to adverbs by the addition of *–e*, such as *faire*, ‘fairly’ (*MT* 3289), *brighte*, ‘brightly’ (*MT* 3352).

d) *Personal Pronouns*

The forms of the personal pronouns are somewhat different from those used in Modern English, so are reproduced here in full:

			Subject	**Object**	**Possessive**
Singular	1		I, ich	me	myn, my
	2		thou, thow	thee	thyn, thy
	3	masculine	he	hym, him	his
	3	feminine	she, ho	her	hir, hire
	3	neuter	it, hit	it, hit	his
Plural	1		we	us	owre, our, owres
	2		ye	you, yow	your, youres
	3		they	hem	hire, here

In a manner similar to the use of *tu* and *vous* in modern French, the distinction between *thou* and *you* in Middle English may be governed not simply by number, but by politeness and the social relationship between speakers. Thus *thou* forms are used with friends, family and social inferiors, and *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*. When translating *that*, it is often useful to try out a range of Modern English equivalents, such as *who*, *whom* and *which*. The prefix *ther–* in words such 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 Constructions

Certain verbs often appear as impersonal constructions, using the third person neuter singular verb with the object form of the personal pronoun. These are usually better translated into a more direct form: *Hym thynketh*, 'It seems to him' or 'He thought' (*MT* 3615); *hem leste*, 'it pleased him' (*MT* 3421); *Me reweth*, 'I regret' (*MT* 3462, literally: 'it rues [saddens] me').

5 Reflexive Pronouns

Many verbs in Middle English can be used with a reflexive pronoun, which refers back to the subject (as in modern French or German). Depending on the verb and how it is used, the pronoun may need to be directly translated; conversely, it may be understood as part of the verb. For example, the reflexive pronoun *hym* in *dressed hym upward*, 'took his place' (*MT* 3358) needs to be translated, where the same reflexive pronoun in *gooth hym up*, 'goes up' (*MT* 3434), does not.

6 Contractions

Sometime personal pronouns and negative adverbs are merged into associated verbs: thus, *hast thow?*, 'have you?', becomes *hastow* (e.g., *MT* 3534); *ne wiste*, 'did not know' becomes *nyste* (*MT* 3414); *ne wolde*, 'did not wish', becomes *nolde* (*MT* 3122).

7 Extra Negatives

In Modern English, double negatives cancel each other out, but Middle English often uses double negative compounds, inherited from Old English, which can make the sense of negation more emphatic. (Modern French has inherited similar compounds from earlier French usage, using paired negative adverbs, such as *ne … pas*, *ne … jamais*, *ne … plus*.) A pair of Middle English negative adverbs is expressed using a single negative adverb in translation, so that *ne roghte nat a bene* (*MT* 3772) becomes 'he didn't care a bean'. There are some triple negatives, but in these cases the translation must omit both parts of the double negative around the verb: thus *noon of us ne speke nat a word* (*MT* 3586) is literally 'none of us not says not a word', but makes more sense translated as 'none of us says a word'.

8 Word Order

Word order in Middle English is often more free than in Modern English, and in particular there is more inversion of subject and verb (e.g. *wol I wake*, 'I shall wake up' (*MT* 3686) or subject and object (e.g. *knokke they*, 'they knock' (*PT* 541)), often dictated by the needs of the poetic metre or rhyme.

In analysing difficult sentences, you should first locate the verb, then its subject, and finally the object or the complement. (Put simply, a verb that involves activity usually takes an object: *she hit the ball, he gave her the book*. A verb that describes a state of affairs takes a complement: *it was yellow, you look better*.) When you have found the elements, put them together and reorder them according to Modern English practice, which should make it easier to see how the various qualifiers fit in.

9 Connection of clauses

Middle English often does not indicate the connection of clauses as clearly as Modern English. In trying to understand or translate the texts, you may need to insert connecting words. On occasion you may have to provide verbs that have been omitted. This happens particularly with the verb *to be* – for instance, *Hir filet brood of silk*, 'Her broad headband [was made] of silk' (*MT* 3243) – or with verbs of motion. (You may also need to regularize number or tense: in Middle English a subject can shift from singular to plural or the syntax from present to past within a sentence.)

Chaucer often cuts between the past tense and the historic present. Sometimes, in telling a story, we use the present tense to make the events seem more immediate, even though we and our audience know that the events occurred in the past. Chaucer's practice of changing tenses, and of omitting connectives and other implied words, may well be closer to spoken English – after all, he is representing spoken narratives – than modern formal writing could be.

10 Change of Meaning

Quite simple words in Middle English may carry a variety of meanings, so take care to make a selection that fits the context. Many of the words Chaucer uses are also found in Modern English (often with different spellings), but some of them have changed their meaning, so it is a good idea to check the notes or the glossary even where words look familiar.

If you are interested in investigating the ways in which words change their meanings over time you can look at the entries and quotations provided in large historical dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (online via the library catalogue) or the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*; see also 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). Below are some examples.

Middle English word	**Meaning**	**Modern Equivalent**
aventure	happening/event	adventure
biddeth	pray	bid, ask
buxom	obedient, humble, submissive	full-bosomed, amply proportioned
caste	planned	cast
chambre	bedroom	chamber
debonair	meek	debonair, confident, stylish

Middle English word	Meaning	Modern Equivalent
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 are four lists of common Middle English words from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the order in which you will meet them in the Middle English language classes. As these lists are intended for learning by heart, only single-word glosses are shown. If you are in doubt about a word in *SGGK*, try sounding it out.

There is a full glossary in the set-text (J. A. Burrow's edition of *SGGK*), but should you wish to delve more deeply into the poet's language, and into varying interpretations of the text, you may find it worthwhile to explore other editions. Two sound editions, with detailed glossaries, introductions and notes, are:

Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: 'Pearl', 'Cleanness', 'Patience', 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 5th edn, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007; classmark PR1203.A6).

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967; classmark PR2065.G3).

Note that both of these editions retain the Middle English letters *thorn* (þ) for 'th', and *yogh* (ȝ), representing sounds today covered by various letters and letter combinations, most commonly *y*, as in *he* (ye) and *g* (so Middle English 'knight' was spelt *knyȝt*).

Week 1

uch	each	lede	sir
quat	what	burgh	castle
hathel	man, knight	burnes	men
fele	many	stifest	boldest
sellyes	wonders, marvels	carp	tell, say
forthi	therefore	seker	sure, certain
fayryye	supernatural, magic	wyse	fashion, manner
demed	judged	gomen	game, sport

athel	noble	frayst	ask
freke	man, knight	innogh	enough
stouned	astounded	bide	receive, endure
steven	voice	bur	blow
hor	their	felle	daring, fierce
wyye	man	fonde	try
rekenly	politely	lyghtly	quickly, readily
luflych	graciously, kindly	auen	own
quyle	while	elles	as long as
won	dwelling place		

Week 2

schyr	bright	etaynes	giants
hals	neck	dughty	brave
segge	man	Dryghtyn	God
quy	why	wrathed	troubled, angered
trawthe	truth, integrity, honour	plytes	difficulties, hardships
ayquere	everywhere	red	guide, advise
cler	bright, pure	felle	skin
vylany	discourtesy, wickedness	lyre	face
tulk	man	hende	noble one, gracious one
folde	earth	auncian	ancient one
melly	battle	schedes	falls, is shed
fong (pres.: fange)	took, got	gered	arrayed
hende	noble, gracious	swyre	neck
clannes	purity	burde	lady
passes	surpasses	lykkerwys	delicious
fremedly	as a stranger, exile	lyk	lick, taste
ferly	wonder, marvel		

Week 3

slode	slid, drifted	kennes	teaches
dyn	din, sound	iwysse	indeed
dernly	secretly	clere	lovely one
stylle	softly, quietly	quere-so	whenever
kest up	lifted up	derf	bold
semly	appropriate, fitting	thede	land
spelle	speech, words	drurye	love
let as	let on as, behaved as though	lel	loyal
		lettrure	learning, doctrine
sayned hym	signed himself	auntered	ventured, risked

sawe	prayer, words	wenged	avenged
quit	white	comlokest	noblest, finest
yerne	eager	elde	generation, time
swythely	quickly	hetes	promises
costes	observances, customs	yonke	young person
mon	someone	dille	stupid

Week 4

gome	man	asay	test
cayres	go, ride	lewté	loyalty
halwes	saints	greme	anger, resentment
layne	conceal	schalk	man
gruchyng	crossly	meled	spoke
ilk	same	larges	generosity
tulk	man	loghe	laughed
wele	good things	apert	openly
wyrde	fate	egge	blade, sword
schore	ground	thrynges	go, pass
leude	man	sele	good fortune, happiness
launde	glade		
meles	speaks, says	yare	soon
hyght	promised	yarkkes	grants, institutes
paraunter	perhaps	bale	misery
mansed	threatened, menaced	mused	doted, wandered in mind
forwarde	agreement, covenant		
gayne	winnings		

Middle English Language classes

The following schedule shows the passages from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that have been chosen for study in the textual classes**:**

Week 2, Class 1	*SGGK*, lines 231–300
Week 3, Class 2	*SGGK*, lines 619–55, 713–39, 943–69
Week 4, Class 3	*SGGK*, 1178–1207, 1476–1534
Week 5, Class 4	*SGGK*, 2118–39, 2331–2428