

## 4 Middle English

The term “Middle English” (ME) is used to characterize the period in the English language between the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the end of the fifteenth century. Simply asserting these endpoints raises problems, however. Are the beginning and end of this period determined by external events: political change; the imposition of a new, prestige language in the British Isles; and the eventual reassertion of English by royal rulers and leaders? Or are these endpoints determined by internal linguistic changes: the loss of the Old English (OE) inflectional system, the increase in French and Latinate vocabulary, and the systematic changes in the pronunciation of consonant clusters and of long vowels?

Of course, both internal and external factors shape the broad features of ME. But unlike OE, written ME varied greatly from region to region and from time to time. Certain works of literature, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (probably composed in the mid-fourteenth century under aristocratic patronage in the West Midlands) appear in a dialect and a prosody that may have made it incomprehensible to, say, a Londoner of Chaucer’s time and class. It is not as if, with the imposition of Norman rule by William the Conqueror, OE suddenly disappeared. Scribes and scholars were writing in recognizable forms of OE well into the mid-twelfth century. OE texts from the time of Wulfstan were intelligible to readers over a century later. By contrast, famous works such as *Beowulf* and the poems of the Exeter Book lay unread for centuries, with virtually no effect on English life and literature until their rediscovery in the late 1700s.

ME is a complex and multilayered period in English linguistic history, and the aim of this chapter is to illustrate the varieties of its forms and the imaginative, personal, and social uses to which it was put. There is no single, accepted editorial form of ME (in the way that many OE texts have been editorially normalized into West Saxon). There is no single representative literary voice for ME. Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland were contemporaries in late fourteenth-century England (and may have lived in London at the same time). Compare the

iambic pentameter, rhymed lines, and Romance lexicon of *The Canterbury Tales* with the alliterative patterns of *Piers Plowman*:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour,  
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour.

(Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, lines 1–4)

In a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne,  
 I shoop me into shroudes as I a sheep were,  
 In habite as an heremite unholie of werkes,  
 Wente wide in this world wondres to here.  
 Ac on a May morwenyng on Malverne hilles  
 Me bifel a ferly, of Fairye me thoghte.

(Langland, *Piers Plowman*, lines 1–6)

Chaucer and Langland begin their poems with scenes of seasonal change, specific references to time and place, and the development of a clear narrative persona. Whereas Chaucer writes in rhymed, iambic pentameter couplets, and his vocabulary juxtaposes words of OE origin (*shoures*, *soote*, *droghte*, *roote*) with words of French inheritance (*veyne*, *licour*, *vertu*, *engendred*, *flour*), Langland's lines are based on alliterative repetitions in stressed syllables, with a vocabulary that juxtaposes OE words with those of religious Latin. *Somer*, *softe*, and *sonne* are all OE words. So are *went*, *wide*, *world*, and *wondres*. While the word *unholie* (OE *unhalig*) is English, *habit* and *heremite* are newer, Latin terms from the world of the Church. Langland's *shoop* is a form of the old strong verb *sceapan*, to shape, or in this case, dress oneself in something (that verb has now been reformed, by analogy, as a weak verb).

Now look at a story of seasonal change from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

After þe sesoun of somer wyth þe soft wyndez  
 Quen Zeferus syflez hymself on sedezy and erbez,  
 Wela wynne is þe wort þat waxes þeroute,  
 When þe donkande dewe dropez of þe leuez,  
 To bide a blysful blusch of þe bryȝt sunne.

(*Gawain*, lines 516–20)

The season of summer is recognizably there, as is the west wind, Zephyr, and the imagery of fertile fields and liquid life. But the spelling is noticeably different (the use of the final -z to signal plurals; the Qu- for the more familiar Wh-, the

thorns still there for th-). The lexical world of this poem differs markedly from that of Chaucer and Langland. Notice the juxtaposition of words from OE and from Latin and French. *Zeferus* is from Latin, and what he does here is *syflez himself*: gently blows or whistles through, from French verb *sifler*. *Sedez* is our word “seeds,” and it goes back to an OE (and ultimately Indo-European) root. But *erbez*, herbs, comes from Latin by way of French. Words such as *wynne* (joy), *wort* (root), and *waxes* (increases) are pure OE. But look at the alliterating words *donkande dewe dropez*. *Dew* and *dropez* are OE, but *donkande* is most likely from Old Norse and related to our word “dank” (notice that in the dialect of this poem, the gerund form that southern and London ME would have signaled with -ing is *-ande*). Look at the words in the last line of this quotation:

- *Bide*: to abide or remain in expectation of something; OE.
- *Blysful*: blissful; OE.
- *Blusch*: blush; not OE, but borrowed from other Germanic languages; its appearance in *Gawain* may be the first recorded use in English, and its etymology baffles even the editors of the *OED*.

ME, then, was not just a period of complex linguistic change and regional variation. It was a time when writers and speakers of English were aware of its changing nature and exploited those changes for imaginative and social purposes.

During the ME period, the British Isles were functionally a trilingual culture. This statement does not mean that every person could read and write English, French, and Latin. Nor does it mean that any single person or group would have encountered all of these languages in the course of their lives. What it means is that these three languages were the media for intellectual, literary, religious, and administrative organization for more than four centuries. It means that the idea of an English vernacular was constantly being negotiated among different groups. It means that in certain cases, people were literate and expressive in all three languages and expected certain groups of readers to be as well. Chaucer’s contemporary John Gower wrote long poems in English, French, and Latin; he would not have done so if he was not assured that each would have a knowledgeable readership.

Finally, during the ME period we have the first sustained examples of personal expression in the vernacular. People began writing letters to each other in the late 1300s, and by the 1450s the practice of written personal communication became so widespread that we now have great caches of family and institutional correspondence in clear and fluid English prose. People wrote prayers and personal reflections in their books. Assemblies of texts copied out or remembered fill common books. As you read more and more ME, you come to realize that you are not only reading texts prepared by professional scribes (there are plenty of those) but are also reading the accounts of personal voices.

This chapter begins by delineating the changes that were going on in OE in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It reviews the major linguistic features of ME and illustrates how various writers used the resources of their local or personal form of ME to give expression to religious faith, social conflict, and literary fiction. Finally, it delineates the key features of the dialects of ME, and it explores some of the personal voices that we can recover from the written page.

### **From OE to ME: Changes in Sound and Structure**

Over the six centuries that OE was the dominant vernacular in England, the language changed in pronunciation, grammatical form, and expressive organization. To read texts in late OE is to see the distinctions in word endings progressively leveling out. Various noun endings (-um, -an, -en, and so on) come to be written increasingly as simply a vowel and nasal. It has been argued that because OE (like the old Germanic languages) had such a powerful stress on the root syllable of a word, the word endings became increasingly unstressed and, in turn, indiscriminate. The vernacular texts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries look different from those of earlier periods. Because scribes wrote largely as they spoke, and because texts continued to be copied or composed throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries, we can chart some of the major changes from OE with reasonable assurance.

One of the most important documents for studying the political and linguistic history of late pre- and early post-Conquest England is the *Peterborough Chronicle*. The monks of the abbey of Peterborough (in Cambridgeshire) participated in making what we now call the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This text, which appears in a variety of versions written at different times and places in England, offers a prose history of England, organized by year. Some of these yearly entries (or annals) are clearly imagined, copied from previous texts, or are more cases of lore and legend than history.

Whatever their relationship to lived experience, the texts of the *Peterborough Chronicle* illustrate how scribes were coping with the changing grammar and sound of their language. A good example is the changing form of the introductory formula for each entry. Each entry begins with a phrase that translates as “in this year.” The entry for 1083 in the *Peterborough Chronicle* uses this formula in a way that to us looks like textbook OE: *On þisum geare*. The preposition “on,” meaning “in” or “during,” took the dative case, and the endings -um and -e of the next words mark the dative, masculine, singular forms of their words.

In the 1000s and 1100s, case endings started to level out, and prepositions became more important than case. The entry for 1117 opens: *On þison geare*. Here, the adjectival ending has leveled out to a back vowel plus an indiscriminate nasal. Perhaps the scribe is recording the sound of his language. Perhaps he is recording what he thinks a grammatical ending should be, even though it no longer corresponds to his speech. For whatever reasons, the scribal spellings of

the opening formula continue to change, and by 1135 it reads: *On his geare*. The adjectival ending has been completely lost, even though the final -e in the noun may still signal the dative case. All sense of that signaling has been lost in the final entry of the *Peterborough Chronicle* from 1154: *On his gear*.

These examples are revealing but not absolutely accurate. Modern scholars have shown that the *Chronicle* entries from 1122 to 1131 were all written at the same time and back-dated. The entries for 1132 to 1154 were also composed at one time. We do not get real-time, year-by-year representations of speech. What we do get is the scribal attempt to represent changes in language: that is, evidence that writers and readers recognized that their language was changing and that it was their responsibility to record that change.

Based on this material, and a host of other examples, we can systematically delineate a set of changes in the leveling of inflectional endings through what has been called vowel reduction. Endings that were made up of a vowel and a consonant gradually reduce to a single vowel (or an indiscriminate, unstressed vowel and a consonant). Endings that originally had different vowels gradually reduce to a final -e. Endings that consisted solely of a final -e tended to disappear entirely.

These changes and many others seem to have been going on almost irrespective of the effect of Norman French on OE. Peterborough, for example, was far from the site of the initial conquest and further still from the administrative center of Anglo-Norman rule. Yet the OE of this *Chronicle* is changing in the century after 1066, looking (from our perspective) more “modern” as the years go by.

The *Peterborough Chronicle* offers valuable evidence for the development of early ME prose as a medium of personal expression. The entry for 1137 surveys the entire period of the tumultuous reign of King Stephen (1135–1154). This is a piece of writing with a real voice: a work of historical prose that carries literary weight and reveals the resources of mid-twelfth-century English used to their full effect.

Dis gær for þe king Stephne ofer sæ to Normandi, and ther wes underfangen forþi ðat hi wenden ðat he sculde ben alswic also the eom wes and for he hadde get his tresor – ac he todeld it and scattered sotlice. Micel hadde Henri king gadered gold and sylver, and na god ne dide me for his saule tharof.

(Clark 1970, p. 55)

[In this year the King Stephen traveled over the sea to Normandy, and there he was received because of the fact that they believed that he should be [treated] just as the uncle [King Henry I] was, and because he [Stephen] had received [inherited] his [Henry’s] wealth – but he [Henry] had dispersed and scattered it foolishly. King Henry had gathered a great deal of gold and silver, but it was not used for the benefit of his soul.]

At the linguistic level, this passage bears all the marks of late OE. Even though most of the grammatical endings have dropped out (there is no ending for *Dis*, the final -e in *gære* probably represents the remnant of the dative case), there remain identifiable OE verb forms. The verb *fare*, “to travel,” was a strong verb; its past tense is, as here, *for*. The infinitive in verbs still ends in -en. A word such as *underfangen*, literally “taken in under,” represents OE word formation at its most traditional. The word for Stephen’s uncle, Henry I, is *eom*, corresponding to the West Saxon OE word *eam* (the word in various forms survives well into the later ME and regional early Modern English periods). The verb *wenden*, “they believed,” shares the root of the word *wene*, still found in certain English dialects.

But there is much here that is new. All traces of grammatical gender have disappeared. The thorns and edths of OE spelling remain, but they share space with new scribal forms of th-. There are also new words. What Stephen has inherited here is his uncle’s *tresor*, his wealth or treasure. The word comes from the Latin, *thesaurus*. Here, it appears in an Old French form, and it is the first recorded use of this word in written English. But what Henry had done with that *tresor* is pure OE: *todeled* (with the root of the modern “deal” recognizable). Henry also *scattered* it, a word of remarkably complex and unsure etymology (maybe it is a dialect form; maybe it is related to an older Germanic word), that appears for the first time in English writing here.

What we see in this passage is verbal innovation and grammatical and phonological change, but also some traditional forms. Syntactically, the passage preserves how OE distinguished between “when” and “then” clauses:

þa þe king Stephne to Englaland com, þa macod he his gadering æt Oxenford.  
 When the King Stephen arrived in England,  
 Subject      Verb  
 Then made he his assembly at Oxford  
 Verb           Subject

As we read on in this passage, we see more and more something new juxtaposed against the old. For example, when King Stephen arrests two of his bishops, he puts them in *prisun*, a word that appears first in the 1123 *Peterborough Chronicle* entry and then in this one. When the chronicler tells us that in spite of everything, Stephen really was an ineffective ruler, that’s when the real atrocities start to happen.

þa the swikes undergæton ðat he milde man was and softe and god and na justise ne did, þa diden hi alle wunder.

(*ibid.*, p. 55)

[When the traitors understood that he was a mild man and was gentle and good and did not inflict punishment, then they all performed atrocities.]

Once again, we have the traditional þa/þa clauses to distinguish “when” and “then.” The terms for Stephen’s character are taken from the OE heroic vocabulary: mild, soft, good. The word *wunder* here means not so much “wonder” but terror. In OE, it had an unmarked plural: like one sheep, two sheep, there was one *wundor*, two *wundor*. But then we find the word *justise* – a very special word in the Norman French legal vocabulary. The *OED* defines it as “the exercise of authority or power in maintenance of right.” This entry from the *Chronicle* is the word’s first appearance in written English.

The new words entering the chronicler’s lexicon are words for legal and administrative control. As Norman French came with the new kingship under William the Conqueror, these were the words that gave voice to new structures of power. A word such as *castle* came in with the Normans. Pre-Conquest English people did not build monumentally in dressed stone. Churches and large buildings would have been built of wood or flint cobble, mortared together. But when William landed, the first thing he did was build large stone buildings. In the words of the *Peterborough Chronicle* for 1086 (writing on the conqueror’s death), “Castelas he let wyrcean” (He had castles built), and the word “castle” comes from the Latin, *castrum* (a fortified settlement) into the Norman French of the Conqueror. So when King Stephen’s renegade noblemen seek control, they build castles: “Aevric rice man his castles makede, . . . and fylden þe land ful of castles.” Every rich man: *rice* is certainly an OE word (it goes back to Germanic and Indo-European words for forms of rule: *Reich* in German, *rix* in Celtic, *raj* in Sanskrit, *rex* in Latin). But it is also a word in Norman French, and in that language it carried a different connotation, specifically noble and mighty.

Reading the *Peterborough Chronicle* shows us the ways writers tried to sustain a tradition of OE prose while responding to and recording linguistic and cultural change. A century after its completion in 1154, King Henry III, in the year 1258, in his Provisions of Oxford, announced that he would continue to respect the strictures of the Magna Carta, that great document of 1215 in which King John gave up his absolute authority to a newly emerging confederation of barons and a nascent Parliament. Henry thought himself more a Continental than an English monarch. He appointed many non-English-born men to positions of power, favored his French relatives, and seemed to ignore what the barons of a previous generation had won. By October 1258, things had come to a head, and the nobles forced Henry to pull back: to reaffirm a commitment to the Magna Carta and a commitment to a Parliament that would meet three times a year.

Henry’s proclamation was issued in Latin, French, and English. That English form is the first official royal document in the language since the Conquest, and even though it is clearly a translation from the French text, it offers a remarkable example of how Middle English was becoming a fluent medium for political expression.

Henry, þur3 Godes fultume King on Engleneloande, Lhoaverd on Yrloande, Duk on Normandi, on Aquitaine, and Eorle on Anjow, send i-greting to all

hise holde, i-lærde and i-leawed on Hundendoneschire. Þæt witen 3e wel alle þæt we willen and unnen þæt þæt ure rædesmen, alle oþer þe moare dæl of heom þæt beoþ i-chosen þur3 us and þur3 þæt loandes folk on ure kuneriche, habbeþ i-don and schullen don in þe worþness of Gode and on ure treowþe, for þe freme of þe loande, þur3 þe besi3te of þan toforen i-seide rædesmen, beo stedefæst and i-lestinde in alle þinge abouten ende.

Henry, par le grace Deu, Rey de Engleterre, sire de Irlande, duc de Normandie, de Aquitien, et conte de Angou, a tuz sez feaus cler et lays sauz. Sachez ke nus volons et otrions ke se ke nostre conseil, u la greignure partie, de eus ki est esluz par nus et par le commun de nostre reaume, a fet, u fera, al honour de Deu et nostre fei, et pur le profit ne notre reaume sicum il ordenera seit ferm et estable en toutes choses a tuz jurz.

(Mossé 1968, pp. 187–9)

[Henry, by the grace of God, King of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Normandy and of Aquitaine, and Earl of Anjou, sends greeting to all of his subjects, the learned and the unlearned, in Huntingtonshire. You all know well that we want and desire that our counselors, the greater portion of whom that have been chosen by us and by the people of our kingdom, have acted and should act according to the honor of God and fidelity to us, and for the good of the realm, according to the provisions of those aforesaid counselors, that they be steadfast and firm in all things forever.]

The English version takes a set of French terms, already emerging in the mid-thirteenth century as the common words for power and social value, and translates them back into earlier OE forms.

Le grace Deu	Godes fultume
Clers et lays	i-lærde and i-leawed
Sachez ke	Ðæt wite 3e wel alle þæt
Conseil	rædesmen
Le commun de nostre reaume	loandes folk on ure kuneriche

In OE, *fultume* meant “aid” or “help.” Etymologically, it is related to the modern word “full,” and it connotes completion or a kind of making whole. By the mid-thirteenth century, this was already an archaic word (it may be its last datable appearance in writing here). The phrase *i-lærde and i-leawed* translates as “the learned and the lewd,” an old alliterative pairing (*lewed* in OE meant not obscene but common or untutored). The French phrase *Saches ke* means “you know that.” Here, it becomes an OE correleative clause, which might be rendered today as: “That fact, let all of you know, namely that ...” A counselor is now a *rædesmen*, an adviser, a giver of *rad*, which in OE meant advice. Such a word

would be familiar to readers of OE verse such as *Beowulf* (where Hrothgar has men who give him *rad*), and to us today, who know the infamous pre-Conquest King Æthelred as “The Unready” (Æthelred unræd, Æthelred, the ill-advised). The common of our realm becomes the folk of the land in our kingdom, a phrase of powerful, local connotation (OE *kuneriche* defined the country as under a specific ruler, a king, while the French word *reaume* connoted a core abstract or general sense of political control).

Looking at the different versions of the proclamation, we see how French was translated into English and how an official kind of English was developed: an English that was deliberately archaic and formal, one that would have reminded its readers of old phrases and old times, one that in effect makes the Francophone Henry III into a more familiar English king. Later in the text, we can see this process continue, as French words become OE ones:

honour	treoþe
profit	freme
reaume	loande
form et estable	stedfæst and i-lestinde
commandons	hoaten
enemi mortel	deadlice i-foan
tresor	hord

By writing in an already old-fashioned-looking English, the proclamation sends a message. In the words of the scholar Thorlac Turville-Petre, the translator of the text

recognized the value in the propaganda of patriotism of reaching beyond the constituency of royal officials and appropriating (however speciously) the language of the ‘loandes folk’ in order to involve a wider section of the population in the political program of reform.

(1996, p. 9)

### The Sounds and Forms of Early Middle English

We can learn much about language and power from these texts. What can we learn linguistically? Final vowels and endings become increasingly unstressed. Prepositions become increasingly important. The words *þe* and *þæt* become the usual form of the definite and demonstrative article. The OE prefix *ge-* that signaled the participial form of verbs has been reduced to an unstressed *i-* prefix. OE long *a* became a long *o* sound in ME. The proclamation’s -oa- spellings record this process in a scribal attempt to represent a new pronunciation.

One of the most important sound changes in early ME is known as lengthening in open syllables. Put simply, certain short vowels in OE words were

quantitatively lengthened if those vowels appeared in syllables that were open, that is, in which there was a consonant followed by another vowel. The best example of this change is the pronunciation of the OE word *nama*. In OE, the first *a* would have been quantitatively short. In ME, this word would have had a quantitatively lengthened *a*. Other vowels were similarly lengthened. The word *abidan* in OE had a quantitatively short *i* sound. By the early fourteenth century, that vowel had lengthened, and the ME word would have been pronounced / abi:də/.

Not every change worked in the same way. The OE word *stæf* became the ME word *staf* (OE short *æ* became ME short *a*). But the plural of this word was *stafas*: the root vowel of the word was now in an open syllable. In ME, this would have been pronounced /sta:vəs/. This new long *a* sound ultimately became the diphthong /eɪ:/ in Modern English, due to the changes wrought by the Great Vowel Shift. Similarly, words such as “name” and “blame” took on this sound. For this reason, we say “staff” with a short *a*, but “staves” with the diphthong coming from a long *a*.

Of course, there were exceptions. ME *path/pathes* did not become, in Modern English, /pæb/, /pei:bz/. Several words that had lengthening of this kind in ME wound up with modern pronunciations shaped by analogy: that is, forms of pronunciation that made certain words look like other words. Modern English staff/staves may be an exception now, but it is a telling exception that reveals a sound change in ME.

Like many sound changes, lengthening open syllables did not happen in all dialects of ME, nor did it happen at the same time. Modern scholars have debated whether it is a systematic sound change at all or a set of compensatory processes prompted by other changes in syllabic context. Nonetheless, we study and teach these changes to explain how Modern English sounds emerge from earlier environments.

Other changes that were going on during this period, and that help explain modern pronunciations, include the metathesis of certain OE sound groups. Metathesis is the transposing of sounds, for example, in the pronunciation of “spaghetti” as “psghetti,” or the regional American pronunciation of “ask” as “aks.” During the early ME period, new pronunciations of the following OE words emerged:

- beorht* > bright
- hutte* > bird
- thunnor* > thunder
- thurgh* > through
- axian* > ask

For the modern student encountering ME, most of what you will find will look like the following.

### Vowels

The basic system of long vowels:

- /a:/ a low back vowel, in words such as *save* and *caas*; pronounced as in Modern British English “father.”
- /ɛ:/ a mid-front vowel, in words such as *lene*, *heeth*, *breath*; pronounced as in Modern English “they’re.”
- /e:/ a mid-front vowel, in words such as *need*, *sweete*; pronounced as in Modern English “hey.”
- /i:/ a high front vowel, in words such as *bite* and *fine*; pronounced as in Modern English “beet.”
- /ɔ:/ a mid-back vowel, as in *holy*; pronounced as in Modern English “broad.”
- /o:/ a mid-back vowel, as in *do*, *so*, or *mone*; pronounced as in Modern English “dough.”
- /u:/ a high front vowel, as in *mus*, and *hous*; pronounced as in Modern English “shoe.”

ME also developed a set of diphthongs:

- eIi, ey: the spelling for the diphthong pronounced as /ei/ or /ai/, and found in words such as *daie*, *weye*, *may*.
- oi, oy: the spelling for the diphthong pronounced as /oi/ or sometimes /ui/, and found in words such as *boy*, *annoy*.
- ou, ow: the spelling for the diphthong pronounced as /ou/ in words such as *fought* (sometimes these spellings appear in words that were probably still pronounced with a /u:/, such as in *howse*).

ME short vowels, by and large, may be pronounced as in Modern English. But readers should note that the sounds represented in the words “put” and “cut” (which no longer rhyme) were the same in ME (the sound /ʊ/).

Finally, many ME words end with an unstressed *e*. This sound may at times be a remnant of an old grammatical ending, or it may mark that the vowel in the previous syllable has been lengthened. Thus, the word *toune* in the phrase, “out of *toune*” is a remnant of an old dative ending, whereas the word *name* is spelled to indicate that the older, OE short vowel /a/ has been lengthened quantitatively as /a:/. In both cases, the final *e* should be pronounced as the unstressed schwa sound /ə/.

### Consonants

Although the system of OE consonant clusters was simplifying during the ME period, some remain. OE *hring*, *hlahian*, *hwaet*, and the like came to be pronounced

without the initial aspirated *h*. But the word *knight* in ME remained pronounced /knixt/, with the initial *k* still sounded and the digraph -gh- representing a velar continuant. So a word such as *gnawen* (to gnaw) would have been pronounced with the initial *g*.

In reading ME texts, you will see some spelling conventions that descend from OE, some that are borrowed from French, and some that developed on their own by particular groups of scribes. The interdental continuant (voiced or unvoiced) that in OE was represented by the thorn and the edth was gradually replaced by the spelling *th*. The OE thorn, in certain scribal contexts, came to look more and more like the letter *y* (in many manuscripts, a dot over the *y* signals a thorn). Early printers maintained this convention. Thus, it is not uncommon to see the definite article appear as if it were “*ye*.” A phrase such as “*ye olde tea shoppe*” is thus a matter of misreading early orthography and not a matter of historical pronunciation.

In ME, scribes developed the letter *yogh*, ȝ, out of the OE *g*. This letter could represent several sounds, depending on its place in the word:

the glide /j/: *ȝeothe, ȝeare, ȝonge*  
 the velar continuant /x/: *thought, through, knight*  
 the unvoiced alveolar stop /ȝ/ as in the name *Laȝamon*.

### ***Stress and Syllables***

ME words from OE maintained their stress on the root syllable of the word. This was usually the first syllable, except when there was a prefix. This habit largely remains in Modern English.

Polysyllabic words from Latin or French tended to be pronounced with all syllables, with the stress on final one. Thus, *marriage* would have had four syllables in ME. *Governance, steadfastnesse*, and similar words would have had their stress on the final syllable before the unstressed (but still pronounced) final *e*.

### ***Nouns***

Grammatical gender had largely disappeared in written ME by the fourteenth century. OE case endings had leveled out, often to final -e. While prepositions were increasingly used to mark relationships among words in a sentence (as opposed to case endings), in many cases, ME did preserve word endings that marked grammatical relationships. Many nouns were still written with a final -e when they were in the dative case (that is, as the indirect object of a verb or as part of a prepositional phrase). The final -s and -es came to represent the possessive (except in certain cases) and (except in certain other cases) the plurals of nouns.

Exceptions to these general rules came from OE words with different ways of marking or not marking plurals. Thus, OE (like other Germanic languages) had nouns with so-called mutated plurals: that is, the plural was signaled by a change in the root vowel, the product of i-mutation during the Germanic period. ME preserved many of these:

foot / feet  
goose / geese  
mouse / mice

But several older mutated plurals came to be re-formed by analogy with -s plurals. Thus, the OE plural of *boc*, *bec*, came to appear largely as *bokes* by the time of Chaucer. The OE word *brober* had the plural form *breber*. In certain regional dialects (especially southern ME), an older *en* plural was added on, giving the Modern English word “brethren.” Plural endings in -en also survive in words such as “children,” and “oxen.”

Some words in OE did not have an inflected plural. Thus, the plural of the words for “sheep,” “fish,” “wonder,” “word,” and “thing” was unmarked (as it still is, in Modern English, for “sheep” and “fish”).

### Verbs

The ME system of verbs largely descends from OE. There are only two conjugated tenses (present and past). Futurity is marked by additional, so-called modal or helping verbs (“shall,” “will,” and the like).

One of the features that distinguishes ME dialects is the ending of verbs, and in some dialects the endings of the second- and third-person singular would have been -s or -es, rather than -st and -th, respectively.

Most strong verbs from OE survive in ME as strong verbs. By the later ME period, the distinctions between the vowels among the four principal parts of the verb may have leveled out. For example, the verb “to shoot” survives in four distinct forms in the thirteenth-century text of the *Ancrene Wisse*: *Scheoten*, *scheat huttenen*, *ishotnen*. By Chaucer’s time and place, however, the forms have been reduced to *shoot*, *shot*, *i-shot(en)*. Verbs such as “ride,” “drive,” and “write” wind up with only three forms:

ride, rode, ridden  
drive, drove, driven  
write, wrote, written

Some OE strong verbs came to be re-formed as weak verbs in the course of ME. Thus the verb *weax*, meaning “to wax” or “grow,” became a weak verb: *wax*, *waxed*.

Some verbs took on different meanings or grammatical functions, depending on whether they appeared in the strong or the weak form. Thus,

hang, hung, hanged  
shine, shone, shined

Here the distinction is between transitive and intransitive: “I shined my shoes,” but “the sun shone.”

OE weak verbs remained weak verbs in ME. Any verb that entered English (then or now) from another language entered as a weak verb.

### ***Personal Pronouns***

ME is the period in which a great variety of personal pronouns appear, depending on the time and place of the written text. OE personal pronouns were words that began with *h*. Thus *he* was the masculine; *heo* was the feminine; *hir* was the plural possessive “their,” and so on. Three things happen in the course of ME that change the system of pronouns:

- H-forms are regularized in the South and East Midlands.
- Sh- and sch- forms for the feminine third person come to appear in the West Midlands and are eventually absorbed into the metropolitan, literate standard.
- Th- forms, which descend from Scandinavian forms and predominated in northern dialects, become part of the metropolitan, literate standard.

Although there are many possible reasons for these changes, one likely cause is the migration of people from the north and Midlands to London during the late 1300s and early 1400s. Plague, famine, and the lure of the city led many to leave their rural homes. Many of the scribes in the official scriptorium of government (known as the Chancery) came from the north and the Midlands, and their dialects may have helped standardize the th- forms for the plural pronouns.

The study of pronoun forms in ME has characterized a great deal of work in dialectology and historical change. It remains a complex subject. Often, different manuscripts of the same text may have different forms of the pronouns. Pronominal forms were far from standard in the ME period and far from standard during the first centuries of Modern English.

In addition to these regional and temporal variations, ME preserved the OE forms of the second person, thou-forms and you-forms. In OE, this distinction was largely a matter of number: thou-forms were singular, and you-forms were plural. During the ME period, perhaps under the influence of French, these forms also came to distinguish informal and formal terms of address and relationship, perhaps modeled on the French *vous* and *tu*. Generally speaking, the informal thou-forms were used when a superior spoke to an inferior, when a parent spoke

to a child, or when a lover spoke to someone intimate. God was always addressed in the informal/intimate (as in other European languages). You-forms were used when addressing more than one person, when speaking up to a superior or a stranger, or when seeking to distance oneself, formally or socially, from another. In Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, for example, patient Griselda will address her husband, the Duke Walter, in you-forms:

Remembre yow, myn owene lord so deere,  
I was youre wyf, though I unworthy were.

(*CLT*, lines 881–2)

Walter responds, dismissing her and telling her to take only the clothes she had on when he took her in:

‘The smok’, ‘quod he, ‘that thou hast on thy bak,  
Let it be stille, and bere it forth with thee.’

(*ibid.*, lines 890–1)

When Walter finishes testing Griselda and drops the pretense of his anger, he turns to her and uses the thou form of intimacy:

Thou art my wyf, ne noon oother I have.

(*ibid.*, line 1063)

### ***Idioms and Verb Phrases***

ME adopted many phrases from French, using English words but keeping the French idiom. Most of these constructions rely on a verb together with an object. Thus, phrases such as the following were based on French models: “Do battle; give offence; have mercy; make peace, take care.” In Chaucer's ME, the nouns are French nouns, illustrating that Chaucer is adapting French idioms into his language. He will take the verb “do,” for example, and use the following noun objects in new ways: correction, diligence, execution, offense, oppression, service.

### **The Scandinavian Element in ME**

Studies of ME vocabulary stress the role of French in augmenting the lexical resources of the vernacular. French became the prestige language of the court, and most of our words for government, administration, cuisine, high culture, fashion, and the built environment enter into English between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. But ME is more than an OE substrate with a Francophone veneer. English speakers were in contact with speakers of Old Norse (ON) from the ninth century onward. In fact, England was ruled by Scandinavian kings in the early eleventh century (Cnut was king of England from 1018 until his death

in 1035, and simultaneously king of Denmark and Norway). During the ME period, many Scandinavian words and pronunciations entered the northern dialect. Many of these words and sounds became part of educated or official English in the London courts and bureaucracy by the end of the fifteenth century.

There are several ways we can trace this Scandinavian impact. First, there are words that were cognate in OE and Scandinavian languages but with somewhat different meanings. OE *dream* meant “joy”; ON *dream* meant “dream.” The ON meaning replaced that of the OE. Similarly, OE *deor* meant “wild animal”; ON *deor* meant “deer.” Although OE had a kenning for “window,” our word comes not from that metaphor but from an ON one: *vindauga*, “eye for the wind.”

Second, there were many words that OE and ME shared with Scandinavian languages, but these had different pronunciations. Some of them became distinctions of ME dialect, and some were distinctions of vocabulary. Words with sh in English were sk words in Scandinavian; words with ch in English were k in Scandinavian. Thus, the following words meant the same things:

church	kirk
milch	milk
ship	skip
shirt	skirt

In the course of the ME and early Modern English period, however, these variants took on different connotations. Thus, while “shirt” and “skirt” were both items of clothing, they came to refer to different kinds of clothing. A ship came to be commanded by a “skipper,” a very different occupation than that of a “shipper.” A “milch” cow came to mean a particular and regionally distinctive animal; “milk” became the common term for the liquid. While just about everyone went to “church,” the word *kirk* became a familiar but distinctive regional variant.

Third, words that were unique to the Scandinavian languages entered regional English and, later, metropolitan speech and writing. Often, these words had distinctive sounds: *ill*, *ugly*, *muggy*, and the like. Chaucer marks these words as northernings in his *Reeve’s Tale*. By the end of the fifteenth century, they were acceptable words in London English.

Finally, and most noticeably, ME appropriated the Scandinavian forms of the third person. OE forms, and Midland and southern ME forms, were h-forms: *he*, *hem*, *hir*, *hire*. Northern forms were th-forms: *they*, *them*, *their*, *theirs*. Charting the change from h- to th-forms has preoccupied historians of English for decades, and the regional and temporal variations among them have been mapped with a great degree of detail.

Although the data is complex, it would be fair to say that by the fifteenth century “they” was the form that had become standard for the third-person plural nominative, whereas “their” and “them” do not appear to be the norm until the last third of the fifteenth century.

## Different Forms of French in ME

Words from French entered ME at different times and in different ways. During the first centuries of Norman rule, words came into use from Norman French. These were largely words for particular religious, social, political, and architectural concepts. Among the earliest were words such as (in their Modern English equivalents):

castle  
honor  
justice  
martyr  
miracle  
prison  
privilege  
rent  
treasure  
virtue

A second wave of French loan words came in from Central French. When Henry II became king in 1154, he began a three-century rule from the House of Plantagenet, a dynasty originally from Anjou in France. Their French was different from that of the Normans. Because the Normans descended from Germanic-speaking peoples, the phonology of Norman French bears the influence of Germanic sounds. By contrast, Central French preserves sounds more directly descended from Latin. Here are groups of words that may be distinguished by Norman and Central pronunciation. In effect, what we are looking at here are patterns of reborrowing of words into English over time.

- Norman French had a /w/ sound and spelling for Central French words with a /g/ sound and a *gu* spelling.
  - wiles guile
  - William Guillaume
  - war guerre
  - warden guardian
  - warrantee guarantee
- Norman French had a /k/ sound, spelled with a *c* for Central French words with a /č/ sound, spelled *ch*.
  - castle château
  - cap chapeau
  - cattle chattel
  - carriage chariot

In addition to these differences in pronunciation, the French court established firmer relationships with continental French culture and literature. In fact, many works in Old French, such as the *Lais and Fables* of Marie de France and the *Chanson de Roland*, may have been composed in England (or at the very least copied by French scribes in England). New words were entering English for complex social structures and philosophical concepts. The following words are recorded from the early 1300s on (though they may well have been in use before then), and are grouped by spellings that enable a modern student to find French words in English:

ei, ey: obey, air, fair, quaint  
 oi, oy: boy, joy, toy, royal, exploit  
 ioun, ion: explanation, relation  
 ment: amendment, commandment  
 ence or aunce: eminence, reference  
 our, or or: color, favor

A third wave of Francophone borrowings began in the late fourteenth century, with the sustained literary activities around the court of Richard II (r. 1377–1399) and with the influence of Chaucer’s poetry on later fifteenth-century writers. While Chaucer’s role in expanding the vocabulary of English may be exaggerated (he coined very few words, and many words attributed to his first usage were in fact in circulation before he wrote), he took on the rhetorical pose of a linguistic innovator. His readers and later imitators described him as the “purifier” of English: that is, they attributed to him a language that was richer with French and Latin terms and purged of what they called the “rudeness” of the older OE vocabulary. No matter whether Chaucer used the following words for the first time, they have long been taken to be characteristic of a new, Chaucerian literary vocabulary:

assent  
 engender  
 expression  
 inspire  
 intention  
 judgment  
 laureate  
 predication  
 protestation  
 remembrance  
 steadfastness  
 verdict

## ME in the Fourteenth Century

The period from about 1330 to 1420 offered an efflorescence of prose and verse writing in English. At the beginning of this period, the manuscript containing the so-called Harley Lyrics and the Auchinleck Manuscript (containing, among other works, the romance known as *Sir Orfeo*) represent how European literary forms were adapted to a vivid vernacular (both manuscripts also contain works in French and Latin). At the end of the period, Chaucer, Langland, Gower, mystical writer Julian of Norwich, and religious autobiographer Margery Kempe were composing long, sustained works of fiction, devotion, and instruction.

This is also the time when sustained texts in ME regional dialects came to be written down: The *Ayenbite of Inwit* in the south, the *Cursor Mundi* in the north, *Gawain and the Green Knight* in the West Midlands, and Chaucer's poetry in a largely East Midland-derived London form. Calling these "dialect" works, however, may be misleading. There was not any recognized "standard" form of English until the late fifteenth century at the earliest. London and Westminster were centers of official and commercial power, but so were cities such as York and Lincoln. Great aristocratic courts flourished from Chester to Northumberland. Religious sees and houses were active from Canterbury to Cambridgeshire and beyond.

Fourteenth-century Chaucerian English (which is really the language of early fifteenth-century manuscripts written in London by scribes trained in royal and commercial scriptoria) is generally taken as a benchmark for students of ME. Perhaps the most famous of Chaucerian passages is the opening of *The Canterbury Tales*, an 18-line sentence that revels in new vocabulary, old forms, and the transformation of literary conventions into an original authorial voice:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
 Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,  
 And smale foweles maken melodye,  
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),  
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
 And palmeres for to seken straunge strandes,  
 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;  
 And specially from every shires ende  
 Of Engelond to Caunterbery they wende,  
 The hooly blisful martir for to seke,  
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

(lines 1–18)

Chaucer's status as a linguistic innovator stems, in many ways, from passages such as this one. Words like *engendered* and *inspired* were new words at the end of the fourteenth century, coming from Latin and French. Words such as *vertu* and *melodye*, although also Romance-derived, had long been in the ME lexicon. But there is more than lexicography here. Chaucer, like many of his contemporaries, was acutely aware of etymologies and contexts. The word *vertu* comes from the Latin *vir*. It signals masculine prowess. In this scene of meteorological power, with the showers of April piercing the drought of March and engendering things, gender is everywhere. So a word such as *melodye* means not "song" but the sounds of bliss or mirth, heavenly or earthly (in *The Miller's Tale*, after Nicholas has sex with Alisoun, he takes up his harp and vigorously "maketh melodye"). For all the Englishness of this landscape – signaled by words of OE origin such as *holt*, *heethe*, *croppes*, *halwes*, *londes*, and *shires* – there is a highly Francophone world here. These birds "That slepen al the nyght with open ye" (every word here from OE) do not have hearts but *corages* – the French word (by Chaucer's time, a word that could mean the bodily organ as well as the emotional condition shaped by a strong one: that is, courage).

The rites of pilgrimage are Latin and Romance ones. The words for this practice – *palmeres*, *pilgrimages*, *martir* – contrast with the word for the people performing them: *folk*. Finally, although Chaucer is writing in iambic pentameter rhymed couplets, a metrical form carefully developed from Continental verse, he concludes this great opening sentence with a single rhyme and an evocation of the older, alliterative prosody of pre-Conquest England. *Seke* and *seeke* rhyme here (our words "seek" and "sick") closing off this final couplet securely. Although the pilgrims are in search of the martyred Thomas Becket, he comes off as a very English saint: holy and blissful. In the final line, the repeated emphases of the initial sounds – *hem hath holpen* – slow down the pace of reading (this poetry, as all ME poetry, would have been read aloud). Chaucer is using the older h-form for the third person, juxtaposed against a newer th- form. He uses the older, strong form of the verb "help," *holpen*.

At the level of syntax, Chaucer's ME still sustains the older OE word patterns signaling "when"/"then" clauses, even as there are now two words to distinguish them. Over the centuries of ME use, interrogative words came to be used as relatives. In OE, relative pronouns were demonstrative pronouns. A phrase such as, "the man who" would be, in OE, "Se mann se." Words such as *who*, *what*, *which*, and *when* came to be used as relative pronouns and temporal markers. The OE patterns we saw in King Alfred's Preface to the *Pastoral Care*: "Ða ic ða ðis eall gemunde, ða gemunde ic" were long gone by Chaucer.

Yet Chaucer still used old syntactic patterns. A distillation of the first sentence of *The Canterbury Tales* would be:

When April pierces...  
Then long folk

When= Subject + Verb  
Then = Verb + Subject

Syntax, vocabulary, sound, and sense all come together in this passage to show us how Chaucer carefully uses the resources of his vernacular to shape a vivid sense of seasonal change and local identity.

Of course, there is much more to ME than Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*. Medieval lyricists appropriated Continental forms of verse (the pastourelle, the rondeau, and others) to offer supple, vernacular expressions of love and nature. Religious writers recorded prayers and penance, lives of the saints, and mystical moments. While Latin remained the medium of intellectual and devotional expression in the university and the Church, English was increasingly the vehicle for personal expression. The fourteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342–ca. 1416) wrote her *Revelations of Divine Love* in the 1380s, recording a series of visions that she had in 1373 during a grave illness. Julian knew French and Latin. Her writings circulated in her native East Anglia and possibly in metropolitan London. She crafted a way of being devout in English. Here is a brief moment of self-reflection.

Botte God forbede that ye schulde saye or take it so that I am a techere, for I meene nought soo, no I mente nevere so. For I am a womann, leued, febille, and freylle. Botte I wate wele this that I saye. I hafe it of the schewyng of hym that es soverayne techare. Botte sothelye, charyte styrres me to telle yowe it, for I wolde God ware knawenn and my eveynn-Crystenne spede, as I wolde be myselfe, to the mare hatynge of synne and lovyng of God.

(Wogan-Browne et al. 1999, p. 81)

Julian develops what her most recent editors call a “language of equality” here – one that addresses all possible English Christians. She writes consistently in the *yow* forms, the plural; she often transforms Latin religious terms into vernacular ones. Her word *schewyng*, for example, translates the Latinate “revelation,” and it does so in a way that is powerfully conscious of the etymology of that word. *Revelation* is from *re-velare*, literally a pulling away of the curtain (the Latin word is a calque on the Greek, *apocalyptein*, apocalypse, which literally means a pulling away of a covering). While there are some words from Latin and French here, they fit into patterns that would be familiar from older English rhythm and structure. *Febille* and *freylle* (“feeble and frail”) are French, but they work in an alliterative pairing that evokes the OE formulae. God is a *techare* (OE), but he is a *soverayne* one. That word had powerful resonances in the late 1300s: political rule, individual power, unique authority. So, while Julian talks about *hate* and *love* (OE words), she makes clear that she is guided by *charyte*, a word that recalls the *caritas* of St. Paul and a whole tradition of the Church Fathers.

Julian of Norwich is one of many personal voices in ME, and what is clear about the English language in her lifetime is that it increasingly became the medium for a personal voice. For the first time in the history of the vernacular, we can actually hear what people sounded like: in idiom, in dialect, and in the flow of speech. ME is the moment when “speech-like” utterances appear as speech, and we can explore the voices of ME as human voices much like our own.

### The Voices of Middle English

During the fifteenth century, several English families began to write letters to friends and relatives. This practice grew out of the needs for aspiring gentry and aristocrats to manage lands and monies. Many of these letters are little more than itemized accounts. This practice also responded to the social fact that during that time, family members often moved away from home. Some sought adventure or success in London. Some married outside of expectations. Some tried service at various courts. By the 1450s, writing letters in English became a recognized way of sustaining relationships and, furthermore, developing a personal vernacular that is often as unique as the person speaking and writing.

Among the many pieces of evidence for these uses of English, the letters of the Paston family of Norfolk have been treasured for their range and vividness. Agnes Paston (*ca.* 1405–1479) was the long-lived and brilliantly opinionated matriarch of this family. Many of her letters survive, most of them probably dictated, and several of them rich with personal and local detail.

In a letter dated November 8, 1451, she remarks on the local responses to a wall that she was building around her property. In several other letters, we can see how this work sat ill with her neighbors: it restricted movement across the landscape, and it signaled an assertion of privacy and property at odds with community standards. Here we may actually hear something of the men and women of her time. She writes to her husband, John:

I gret ȝou well, and lete ȝou wete þat Warne Harman, on þe Sonday after Hallumes Day after ensong, seyd oponly in þe cherch-ȝerde þat he wanst wyl þat and þe wall were puddoun, þou he were an hondryd myle fro Paston, he wanst well þat I wolde sey he ded yt and he xuld bere þe blame, seying, ‘Telle yte here ho so wyl, þou it xuld coste me xx nobyllys it xall be puddoun aȝen.’ And þe seyd Warnys wyfe wyth a lovde vosse seyd, ‘All þe deuyllys of hell drawe here sowle to hell for þe weye þat she hat mad!’

(Davis 1971, pp. 43–4)

[I greet you well, and I want you to know that Warren Harman, on the Sunday after All Hallows Day after evensong, said openly in the churchyard that he knew well that, if the wall were pulled down, even if he were a hundred

miles away from Paston, he knew well that I would say that he did it and he should bear the blame, saying, “Tell whomsoever you will, even if it cost me twenty nobles, it would be pulled down again.” And his same Warren’s wife said with a loud voice, “May all the devils of hell draw her soul to hell on a account of this pathway that she has made!”]

This letter is an essay in vernacular quotation. It centers on recording what people said and how they said it. Agnes (or her scribe) conveys the sound and sense of local speech. For example, the word written as “puddon” is a colloquialized combination of the idiom “put down,” recorded in the mid-fifteenth century as meaning pull down or dismantle. The double *d* represents what linguists would call the flapping of the medial unvoiced *t*, and it gives us a little window into the sonic features of the local English. The syntax of these speeches seems to contrast with that of the surrounding representation of indirect speech. Notice the complex patterning of the subordinate clauses and subjunctions: he said openly in the church yard that he knew well that, if the wall had been pulled down, even though he were a hundred miles from Paston, he knew well that Agnes would say that he did it and should bear the blame for it. Compare this with: “Tell it to her, whoever would, that even though it would cost me twenty nobles it shall be pulled down again.” And when Warne’s wife speaks, in a loud voice, we get a line of direct, idiomatic English talk: “May all the devils of hell drag her soul to hell on account of that path she has made!”

What makes these statements colloquial speech? Scholars have identified a range of locutions in ME that may offer a window to the sound and sense of everyday talk. Insults and curses have long drawn on the talk of the townsfolk. They are real, however, often because they are so formulaic. As Colette Moore puts it, “Maligning and belittling one another is apparently a long-standing pragmatic use for language” – something we could apply to Warne’s wife and to characters in Shakespeare and the “dissing” of modern putdowns.

Colloquial obscenity, in fact, emerges in the ME period (people no doubt cursed and swore in Old English, but it was not written down). Chaucer is famous for his vulgar characters: the Host of his *Canterbury Tales*, declaiming that the Chaucerian pilgrim’s *Tale of Sir Thopas* “is nat worth a tord”; the Shipman, whose tale is full of fart jokes; and the Merchant, who protests that he is a “rude” (unlearned) man and describes a wild scene of sex in a pear tree, with the old January unknowingly lifting up his young wife, May.

ME literature is full of such vulgarity. The cycle plays from the north of England are famous for their vivid portrayals of biblical characters as if they were local men and women. The *Townley Play of Noah* features the great ark builder and his wife as a bickering couple:

*Noah:* We! Hold thy tong, ram-skyt, or I shall the still.

*Wife:* By my thrift, if thou smite, I shal turne the untill.

*Noah*: We shall assay as tyte! Have at thee, Gill!  
 Apon the bone shal it bite.

(Bevington 1975, p. 297)

*Noah*: Whoa! Hold your tongue, ram-shit, or I shall still it for you.

*Wife*: By my life, if you hit me I shall hit you back.

*Noah*: Let's give it a try, then! Have at you, Jill!  
 You'll feel it bite down to the bone.

Domestic tension increasingly becomes the topic of popular drama and verse in the fifteenth century. It also became the focus of personal prose. For Margery Kempe, the domestic and the spiritual go hand in hand. Now famous for her autobiography, Margery traveled the world at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries, going on pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, writing of her many pains of childbirth (she gave birth 14 times) and her conflicts with her husband, and giving expression to a deeply felt devotion to religious life. She is one of English literature's great originals. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which she dictated to a male scribe in the late 1430s, tells of her adventures both lived and imagined. Here is a remarkable passage, in which Margery recounts an argument with her husband on Friday, Midsummer's Eve, 1413. They are traveling together, when her husband turns to her and says:

Margery, if her come a man wyth a swerd and wold smyte of myn hed les than I schulde comown kendly wyth yow as I have do befor, seyth me trewth of your consciens – for ye sey ye wyl not lye – whether wold ye suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys suffyr me to medele wyth yow agen as I dede sumtyme?

(Staley 1996, p. 37)

[Margery, if a man came by with a sword and wanted to cut off my head unless I should commune kindly with you [that is, have sex with you], as I have done before, tell me truthfully from your conscience – for you say you will not lie – whether you would stand to have my head cut off or stand for me to meddle [have sex] with you again, as we once did?]

Margery wonders why he brings this up now, as they have not had sex for eight weeks. He replies that he wants to know, and she answers:

Forsothe I had levar se yow be slain than we schuld turne agen to owyr unclenesse.

[Truthfully, I would prefer you to be killed than that we should return to our unclean acts.]

To which the husband bluntly answers: “Ye arn no good wife.”

In the course of their conversation, it emerges that they have not had sex for eight weeks because he was just too afraid to touch her, implying that she would not let him go any further. A long discussion follows, in which they try to reach an agreement: He wants to have sex with her, but he also wants her to pay off his debts and dine with him on Fridays as they used to do. Fridays were fasting days in the medieval Catholic Church, and the deeply devotional Margery will have none of this. In the end, after much debate, they reach an agreement: Margery will pay his debts, she will eat with him, but she will not have sex with him.

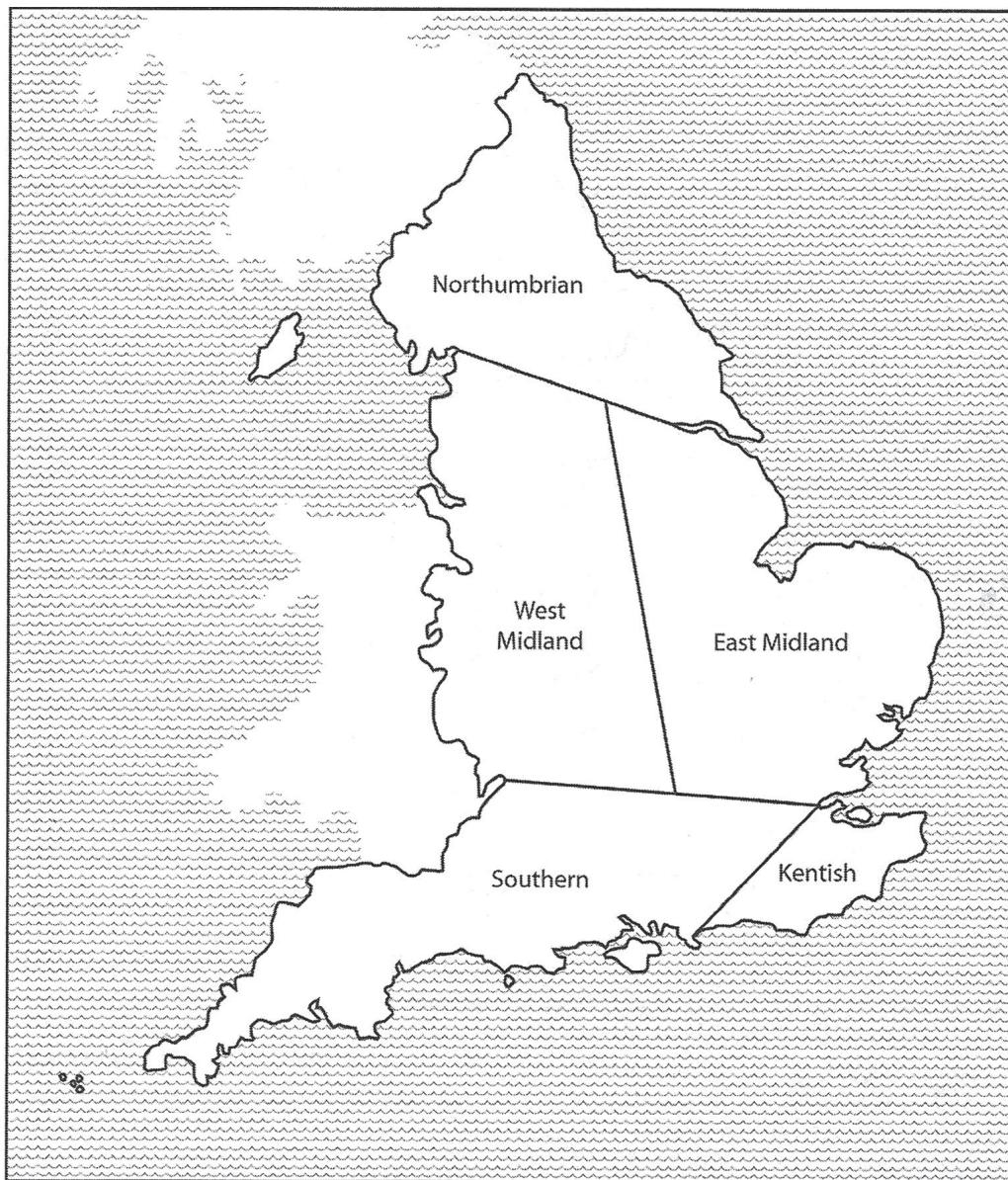
For all the craftedness of the narrative, this extended piece of domestic drama has all the feel of colloquial speech. With few exceptions, just about every word in this dialogue descends from Old English. Those exceptions are the ones that matter. The ME verb *communen* came from French and, by the early fifteenth century, took on the sense of doing something together. To “comown kindly” here is to engage in common activity in a natural way. Elsewhere, Margery tells us that she had no desire to “comown fleschly” with her husband. It is a relatively new expression, and Margery puts it in her husband’s mouth, as if he were ventriloquizing her own idiom. Speaking for himself, the husband uses another term, rich with connotation. To “meddle” came from French as well, meaning blending or bringing together. Again, it is a relatively new word in the early fifteenth century, and what we see in this dialogue is an emerging way of talking about sex, a new development of idioms that, if we do the lexicography, we see almost exclusively in prose rather than in verse. In the end, it is the plainest of plain talk that hits us still, six hundred years after this conversation: “Ye arn no good wife.”

Middle English, then, is a world of learning and lore, of great poets and everyday people. To get a greater sense of the voices of Middle English, we can turn to the study of its dialects.

### Middle English Dialects and Dialectology

The historical study of English has been reshaped by the great projects of corpus linguistics such as the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Middle English*. Scholars have sought to document all recorded forms of spelling, sounds, and forms and map them on to particular regions of the British Isles. What emerges is a kind of weather map of language – with lines indicating borders of spelling and sound. Such maps give us a strong sense, now that the standard maps of ME geographical regions need to be more fine-grained than before in order to grasp the variation in the language (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

In the twenty-first century, these data-driven projects have come under new scrutiny. Scholars now recognize that individual manuscripts may not be fully accurate representations of regional speech. Specific scribes have been identified who produced texts that sometimes reflected their own particular habits of



*Figure 4.1* The major Middle English dialects. A basic, coarse-grained map, dividing England into the five major dialect regions, *ca.* 1200–1350

*Source:* Lerer (2015)

spelling or the spelling conventions of the authors or exemplars from which they copied. What was once thought of as a regional dialect, for example, may really be what has been called a “single scribal idiolect” (Horobin 2015, p. 151).

It has also become clear that region was not the only variable in ME dialect variety. Certain features may be determined by social and class variation, by professional training, and by the personal choice of writers. A small example of this complexity may illustrate how difficult it is to use written texts as evidence of

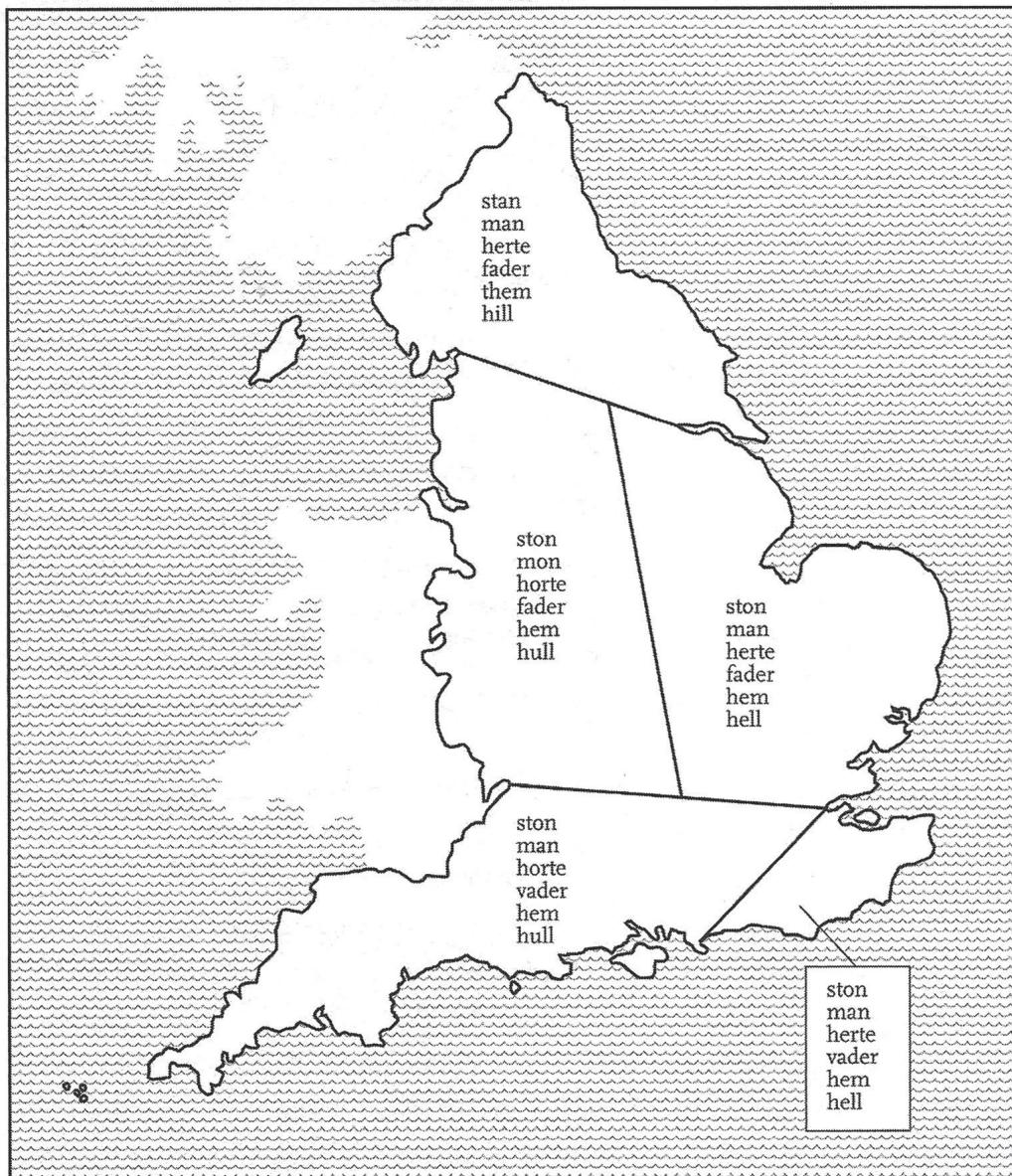


Figure 4.2 Middle English dialect variation according to key words and sounds. A finer-grained map, dividing England into linguistic regions based on the Middle English pronunciation of earlier Old English sounds and forms of the third-person plural pronoun

Source: Lerer (2015)

regional variation and temporal change. In the letters of the Paston family from the mid-fifteenth century, many of the texts were actually written by professional scribes, taking dictation or perhaps copying from the author of a letter (many of the men of the Paston family wrote their own letters, but none of the women did). The scribe James Gloy wrote letters for Margaret Paston and her husband, John Paston I. In a letter from 1446, signed by John, Gloy varied the forms for

the plural possessive pronoun. Our modern form “their” appears once, while the form “her” or “here” appears nine times. In 1469, in a letter for Margaret Paston, Gloyes uses the form “their” nine times; “her” or “here” never appear. One scholar who has examined these letters (and many others) in great detail concludes: “This shows that the scribe may have been less a factor than the text type, or the addressee, or even temporal factors in language change” (Bergs 2005, p. 180). Were the old h-forms of the possessive dropping out in favor of th-forms? Is there a difference between the habits of men and women of the family? Is the scribe changing his habits? We cannot know. What we can know is that regional variation and temporal change are far more complex processes than traditional textbooks present and, furthermore, this complexity is as rich and challenging as the language variation we find in our own time and place.

In addition to this empirical work, historical readings of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writers reveal a deep awareness of regional variation in the vernacular. Writing in 1385, Englishman John of Trevisa commented on the variations in English of his time. He translates the Latin work of Ranulf Higden, the *Polychronicon* (a history of the British Isles), but he adds this material to argue for a political and social context to the dialects of his time:

Also Englischmen, þey3 hy hadde fram þe bygynnyng þre maner speche, Souþeron, Norþeron, and Myddel speche (in þe myddel of þe lond), as hy come of þre maner people of Germania, noþeles, by commyxstion and melyng furst wiþ Danes and afterward wiþ Normans, in menye the countray longage is apeyred, and some useþ strange wlaffyng, chyteryng, harryng and carryng, grisbittyng. ȿis apeyring of þe burþ-tonge ys bycause of twey bynges. On ys, for chyldern in scole, a3enes þe usage and manere of al oþer nacions, buþ compelled for to leve here oune longage, and for to construe here lessons and here þinges a Freynsch, and habbeþ, subþthe þe Normans come furst into Engelond. Also, gentilmen children buþ y-tau3t for to speke Freynsch fram tyme þat a buþ y-rokked in here cradel, and conneþ speke and play wiþ a child his brouch; and oplondysch men wol lykne hamsylf to gentilmen, and fondeþ wiþ gret bysynes for to speke Freynsch for to me more y-told of . . .

Al the longage of the Norþhumbres, and specialych at 3ork, ys so scharp, slytting and frotynge, and unschape, þat we Southeron men may þat longage unneþe undurstonde. Y trowe þat þat ys bycause þat a buþ ny3 to strange men and aliens þat spekeþ strangelych, and also bycause þat þe kynges of Engelond woneþ alwey fer from þat contray.

(Mossé 1968, pp. 286–89)

[Now the English, even though they originally had from the beginning three kinds of speech, Southern, Northern, and Middle (in the middle of the country), as they came from three groups of people from Germania, nonetheless, by mixing together and meddling first with the Danes and then with the Normans, in many people the native language has been corrupted, and some use

strange *wlaffyng*, *chyteryng*, *harryng* and *garryng*, *grisbittyng*. This corruption of the native language is due to two causes. One is because children in school, contrary to the habit and manner of all other nations, are compelled to forsake their own language and construe their lessons and [name their] things in French, and they have done so since the Normans came first into England. The second is because the children of gentlemen are taught to speak French from the time they are rocked in their cradle, and the child can speak it and play with his toys in it. In addition, socially ambitious men want to present themselves as if they were gentlemen, and they try with great effort therefore to speak French in order to be thought better of.

The whole language of the Northumbrians, and especially that of York, is so sharp, cutting and scratching, and unshapely, that we Southern men may scarcely understand it. I believe that this is because they live near strange people and aliens that speak strangely, and also because the kings of England always stay far away from that part of the country.]

Trevisa makes three points that have long governed the study of ME dialects. First, he argues that original dialect boundaries were based on patterns of settlement by the Germanic peoples. Second, he recognizes that language is a socially stratified pattern of behavior. There will always be a prestige language (in this case, French), and some regional forms will become prestige forms (in his case, writing as a Londoner, he disparages the northern dialects). Third, the northern dialect is unique, and that uniqueness comes from a particular mix of geographical and social factors.

A century later, William Caxton raised the question of what the proper form of English should be in his printing of canonical literature. In the preface to his prose translation of a French version of the *Aeneid* (the *Eneydos*, printed in 1490), he tells a story of some Londoners who set sail for the Low Countries and are blown back across the English Channel to the Kentish shore. One of the shipmates goes in search of food and finds a farmhouse. He speaks to the woman there, but she says that she cannot understand him because she does not speak French. The man is offended, because he was not speaking French to her. Clearly his London accent and vocabulary were opaque to her. When he asks if she has any food, in particular any eggs, she remains baffled. As Caxton explains, the word for “eggs” in London English is precisely that. But in Kentish English, the word is *eyren*. We can say now that “eggs” is a form brought to London by northern English speakers and *eyren* is a descendant of the OE word from southern dialects.

These stories make clear that English men and women lived in a world of regional variation and linguistic challenge. The study of ME dialects can help us understand the sociolinguistic condition of vernacular life in medieval England. It can show us how dialect could be represented in texts to make political arguments. Furthermore, it can show us how modern historical linguists develop a methodology of evidence collection and assessment and, in turn, its representation in visual form.

Let's look at a systematic account of the major features of the regional dialects of ME. Not all regional texts will have these features, but they are useful to distinguish the broad outlines of variation and help us see how literary writers of the ME period evoke dialect difference.

### ***Northern***

- OE /a:/ remains /a:/: ham, ban, stan.
- sh is written as sk; ch is written as k: skirt, kirk, skip, benk.
- Present participles end in -ande: lovande, havande.
- Final -ish adjectives appear as -is: Inglis, frekis.
- Forms of the verb “to be” appear as es, er, are.
- Third-person pronouns are Scandinavian loan forms, beginning with th-.
- Third-person singular ends in -es: “he loves.”
- Scandinavian loan words such as ill, ilk, ugly, muggy.

### ***East Midland***

- Present participle ends in -end(e): havend.
- Third-person singular ends in -eth: “he loveth.”
- Present plural and infinitive forms end in -en: to given, to loven.
- Third-person pronouns begin with h-.
- Forms of the verb “to be” appear as ben-forms.

### ***West Midland***

- OE /a/ followed by a nasal is written as o: hond, lond, mon.
- Feminine third-person singular pronouns are ha, heo, rather than “she.”
- Final -ed endings are unvoiced and spelled -et: i-curet, i-fostret.
- Plural present indicatives end in -eth: giveth, vs. East Midland given.

### ***Southern***

- Voicing of initial f and s to v and z: vox, vor, vinde, zen.
- Infinitives and past participles formed without final -n: “to springe.”
- OE /y/ remains a rounded vowel, spelled as u: cumeth, sunne.
- Third-person pronouns appear variously as hi, hore, hom.

### ***Kentish***

- OE /y/ becomes unrounded, written as e: ken (from OE *cynne*, “kin”).
- Voicing of initial f and s to v and z: vox, vor, vinde, zen.

- Third-person plural forms are ham, hare.
- The present participle ends in -inde: havinde.

During the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, literary texts from London offer a mix of forms. Although there is no absolute consistency, the standard editions of Chaucer's poetry, for example, will have the following features:

- OE /æ/ became /a/, thus OE *fæder* became ME father.
- OE /y/ was unrounded and spelled i: thus, OE *kynning* became ME king.
- OE /eo/ became a monophthong, spelled e: thus, OE *deop* became ME *depe*.
- Third-personal feminine nominative pronoun appears as "she."
- Third-person plurals can be th-forms as well as h-forms, often depending on grammatical case. Note Chaucer's line: "That *hem* hath holpen, whan that *they* were seke."

For students of English literature, this information helps explain episodes of humor and social criticism. Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, for example, has long been seen as an extended satire on the rustic northernisms of its two university student characters. Here are some examples of how these two students, John and Aleyn, speak:

"Symond," quod John, "by God nede has na peer.  
Hym boes serve himself that has na swayn."

"Our manicple, I hope he wil be deed,  
Swa werkes ay the wanges in his head."

"... se howgates the corn gas in.  
Yet saugh I nevere, by my fader kyn,  
How that the hopur wagges til and fra."

"I is as ille a millere as ar ye."

"I have herd seyd, 'man sal taa of twa thynges  
Slyk as he fyndes, or taa slyk as he brings.'"

These examples show what Londoners would have heard as characteristic features of northern English. Words such as "no," "fro," "so," and "two" (which came from OE /a:/ words) are spelled with the -a-. The third-person singular of the verb ends in -es, rather than -eth (*werkes*, *wagges*). The ch sound in a word such as *swiche* (Modern English "such") is pronounced with as a -k. Forms of the verb "to be" and of the first-person pronoun are northern forms: thus, "I is" rather than the Midland or southern forms, "I am," or "Ich be," which would have been

familiar to a London readership. Finally, the Scandinavian vocabulary appears here: *boes* (for the word “behooves”), *til* (for “to”), *taa* (“for take”), and *ille*.

Of course, the *Reeve’s Tale* is literature. Its themes include the decay of language, the challenges of using everyday speech to represent the world of experience, and the ways sex and money become forms of exchange. The world of the *Reeve’s Tale* has long been seen as fitting for a tale-teller described, in the general prologue, as a “sclendre, choleric man” (a skinny, angry man). The dialect humor contributes to these thematic concerns, and the coarse foolishness of these students distills itself into a poetic line whose echoic form and liquid assonances sum up the whole *Tale*: “I is as ill a millere as ar ye.”

By contrast, speakers of northern English could mock the south for its pretensions. In the *Second Shepherd’s Play*, one of the cycle dramas from the town of Wakefield in Yorkshire, the comic character of Mak appears. He is a thief and a con man, but here he pretends to be a southern English gentleman. His lines resonate with forms drawn from southern, Kentish, and Midland dialects. Again, this is not a philological transcription but a work of literature. If Chaucer’s students speak a storyteller’s northern, Mak offers up a kind of stage southern, full of sounds and words that the Wakefield audience would associate with the courtly vocabulary of a Gallicized London.

*2nd Shepherd:* Mak, where has thou gone? Tell us tithing.

*3rd Shepherd:* Is he commen Then ilkon take hede to this thing.

*Mak:* What? Ich be a yoman, I tell you, of the king;  
The self and the some, sond from a great lording,  
And sich.

Fie on you! Goith hence  
Out of my presence!  
I must have reverence:  
Why, who be ich?

*1st Shepherd:* Why make ye it so qwaint? Mak, ye do wrang.

*2nd Shepherd:* But, Mak, list ye saint? I know that ye lang.

*3rd Shepherd:* I trow the shrew can paint, the dewill might him hang!

*Mak:* Ich shall make complaint, and make you all to thwang  
At a word,  
And tell evyn how ye doth.

*1st Sheperd:* Bot, Mak, is that soothe?  
Now take outt that Southren tothe  
And sett in torde!

(Bevington 1975, pp. 390–1)

Mak pretends to be more than he is. He uses “Ich” for the northern “I” (though not consistently), and says “Ich be” rather than the “I is” of the Reeve’s students. He tries to sound southern when he says “sich” for what would have been

northern “swilk.” When he says “goith” and “doth” he is putting the -th ending on verbs that would have had an -s ending in the north. When the play’s scribe spells “goith” in this strange way, it is clear that he is overstressing the pronunciation of the vowel: instead of the long *a* sound in the *Reeve’s Tale*, “gas,” we have the long *o*, overdone here. When Mak uses words such as “presence,” “reverence,” and “complaint,” he is speaking like a caricatured courtier, full of polysyllables and Gallic terms.

Of course, the locals find this ridiculous. Their northernisms shine brightly against the backdrop of Mak’s faux Southern: *ilkon*, *wrang*, and *lang*. In the end, they tell him to take his southern tooth and stick it in a turd – a curse as literary as it is laughable (in Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*, the angry Host tells the Pardoner to take his relics and stick them in a “hogges turd”).

What can the study of ME dialects teach us? At the linguistic level, such research shows us the great diversity of the English language, with levels of variation even in single texts. At the methodological level, such work challenges what we consider to be evidence of linguistic use: are we looking at authorial manipulations, scribal conventions, or the true voices of ME speakers? At the literary level, such a study can show us how questions of social identity and personal character lie in language: just what does speech represent, the world or the self?

The study of ME dialects raises important questions about the relationship between regional variation and historical change. One of the challenges that runs through the history of the English language is the reason for language change. What we can see here is that forms and sounds that became “standard” often come from different regions. As northerners moved to the south (to be educated, to try to make their way in the bureaucracy, to aspire to courtly patronage, or to find work in the city), they brought their language with them. From our modern point of view, ME dialects have a place in the vector of language change. Northern dialects, for example, seem phonologically conservative but morphologically advanced. In other words, from our perspective, the standard forms for the th- pronouns and certain verb endings look modern, whereas the pronunciations of certain vowels seem old-fashioned.

But other regional variations also tempt us to find them on the timeline of development. Here is Dan Michel of Northgate’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, written in his own hand, in a manuscript dated 1340, from Canterbury, in Kent:

Vader oure þe art ine hevens, y-hal3ed by þi name, cominde þi riche, y-worþe þi wil ase in hevene: and in erþe.bread our eche-dayes: yef ous to day. and vorlet ous our yeldings: as we vorleteþ our yelderers. and ne ous led na3t: into vondinge. and vri ous fram queade. zuo by hit.

As an autograph manuscript by a known writer with a place and a date, this work, known as the *Ayenbite of Invit*, offers valuable information about how a writer represented his speech. There are the Kentish voicings of initial f and s: *vader*,

*vorlet, vonding, vri, zuo.* The present participle ends in -inde (*cominde*). There are features that look back to Old English, too. Earlier in the text, Dan Michel states that he wrote his work in the library of St. Augustine's church at Canterbury, except he does not say library but says "bochouse." That word (literally a book-house) takes us back to the kennings of Old English, to the bone-lockers and whale roads of *Beowulf*. His opening "Vader oure" is classic OE word order, with the postponed possessive (father our, instead of our father). Finally, there is the title itself. Dan Michel's book is a translation of an earlier, French collection of moral tales, and this new title offers a brilliant example of retro-translation. *Ayenbite* means "again-bite," and it translates, morpheme-by-morpheme, the Romance word we now know as "remorse." *Inwit* means "inner knowledge" and also translates, as a calque, the Romance word "conscience." Even Dan Michel's phrase, "zuo by it," vernacularizes the more familiar "Amen" ending to the prayer. Here, we see a regional writer transforming Continental Christian learning into local English. He reminds us that ME is not just the language of high culture and great poetry but, also, of individual feeling and simple prose.

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