The Origins and Development of the English Language

SEVENTH EDITION

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Based on the original work of
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The Middle English Period (1100–1500)

The beginning and ending dates of the Middle English period, though somewhat arbitrary, are two points in time when ongoing language changes became particularly noticeable: grammatical changes about 1100 and pronunciation changes about 1500. The term *middle* indicates that the period was a transition between Old English (which was grammatically very different from the language that followed) and early Modern English (which in pronunciation was different from what had come before but was much the same as our own). The two dates also coincide approximately with some events in English history that had profound effects on the language.

SOME KEY EVENTS IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

The following events during the Middle English period significantly influenced the development of the English language.

- 1066   The Normans conquered England, replacing the native English nobility with Anglo-Normans and introducing Norman French as the language of government in England.
- 1204   King John lost Normandy to the French, beginning the loosening of ties between England and the Continent.
- 1258   King Henry III issued the first English-language royal proclamation since the Conquest, having been forced by his barons to accept the Provisions of Oxford, establishing a Privy Council to oversee the administration of the government, so beginning the growth of the English constitution and parliament.
- 1309   The corrupt Avignon Papacy began and lasted until 1377.
- 1337   The on-again, off-again 116-year Hundred Years' War began and lasted until 1453, promoting English nationalism.
- 1348–50   The Black Death killed an estimated one-third of England's population and continued to plague the country for much of the rest of the century.

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- 1362   The Statute of Pleadings was enacted, requiring all court proceedings to be conducted in English.
- 1378   The Western Schism began and lasted until 1417, a time of ecclesiastical in-fighting that was resolved at the Council of Constance.
- 1381   The Peasants' Revolt led by Wat Tyler was the first rebellion of working-class people against their exploitation. Although it failed in most of its immediate aims, it marks the beginning of popular protest.
- 1384   John Wycliffe died, having promoted the first complete translation of scripture into the English language (the Wycliffite Bible).
- 1400   Geoffrey Chaucer died, having produced a highly influential body of English poetry.
- c. 1419   Julian of Norwich died. She, Richard Rolle (d. 1349), *The Cloud of Unknowing*'s Anonymous (d. late 1300s), and Walter Hilton (d. 1396) wrote vernacular Christian texts that contributed to the flowering of English mysticism. Hilton and Anonymous wrote in an East Midland dialect.
- 1430   The Chancery office (where legal records were deposited) began recordkeeping in a form of East Midland English, which became the written standard of English.
- 1476   William Caxton brought printing to England, thus promoting literacy throughout the population.
- 1485   Henry Tudor became king of England, ending thirty years of civil strife, called the War of the Roses, and introducing 118 years of the Tudor dynasty.
- 1497   John Cabot sailed to Nova Scotia, foreshadowing English territorial expansion overseas.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE NORMAN CONQUEST

Almost at the end of the Old English period, the Normans invaded and conquered England—an event more far-reaching in its effects on English culture than the earlier Scandinavian incursions.

Edward the Confessor was the last king in the direct male line of descent from Alfred the Great. He died without heirs, and Harold, son of the powerful Earl Godwin, was elected to the kingship. Almost immediately Harold's possession of the crown was challenged by William, the seventh duke of Normandy, who was distantly related to Edward the Confessor and who thought, for a number of tenuous reasons, that he had a better claim to the throne.

The Norman Conquest—fortunately for Anglo-American culture and civilization, the last invasion of England—was, like the earlier Danish invasions, carried out by Northmen. Under the leadership of William the Conqueror, they defeated the English and their hapless King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Harold was killed by an arrow that pierced his eye, and the English, deprived of his effective leadership and that of his two brothers, who had also fallen in the battle, were ignominiously defeated.

William and the Northmen whose *dux* he was came not immediately from Scandinavia but from France, a region whose northern coast their

not-very-remote Viking ancestors had invaded and settled as recently as the ninth and tenth centuries, beginning at about the same time as other pagan Vikings were making trouble for Alfred the Great in England. Those Scandinavians who settled in France are commonly designated by an Old French form of *Northmen*, that is, *Normans*, and the section of France that they settled and governed was called Normandy.

The Conqueror was a bastard son of Robert the Devil, who took such pains in the early part of his life to earn his surname that he became a figure of legend—among other things, he was accused, doubtless justly, of poisoning the brother whom he succeeded as duke of Normandy. So great was his capacity for rascality that he was also called Robert the Magnificent. Ironically, he died in the course of a holy pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Robert's great-great-grandfather was Rollo (*Hrólfr*), a Danish chieftain who was created first duke of Normandy after coming to terms satisfactory to himself with King Charles the Simple of France. In the five generations intervening between Duke Rollo and Duke William, the Normans had become French culturally and linguistically, at least superficially—though we must always remember that in those days the French had no learning, art, or literature comparable to what was flourishing in England.

English culture changed under French influence, most visibly in the construction of churches and castles, but it retained a distinctively English flavor. The Norman French dialect spoken by the invaders developed in England into Anglo-Norman, a variety of French that was the object of amusement even among the English in later times, as in Chaucer's remark about the Prioress, that "she spoke French quite fair and neatly—according to the school of Stratford-at-Bow, for the French of Paris was unknown to her."

THE REASCENDANCY OF ENGLISH

For a long time after the Norman Conquest, England was trilingual. Latin was the language of the Church, Norman French of the government, and English of the majority of the country's population. The loss of Normandy in 1204 by King John, a descendant of the Conqueror, removed an important tie with France, and subsequent events were to loosen the remaining ties. By the fourteenth century, several things happened that promoted the use of English. The Hundred Years' War, beginning in 1337, saw England and France bitter enemies in a long, drawn-out conflict that gave the deathblow to the already moribund use of French in England. Those whose ancestors were Normans eventually came to think of themselves as English.

In addition, the common people had begun to exercise their collective power, rising up out of calamitous circumstances. The Black Death, or bubonic plague, perhaps reinforced by pneumonia, raged during the middle of the fourteenth century, killing a third to a half of the population, its horror expressed in a Welsh lament common then: "Death invades us like black smoke! We fear the shilling in the armpit!" This "shilling" refers to the chilling first symptom of the plague, an odd black swelling in the armpit or groin, followed by unspeakable

agony and death (Tuchman 93 in Butcher xiv). The plague produced a severe labor shortage that led to demands for higher wages and better treatment of workers. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381, led by Wat Tyler and sparked by a series of poll taxes (fixed taxes on each person), was largely unsuccessful, but it presaged social changes that were fulfilled centuries later.

Meanwhile, John Wycliffe had challenged the authority of the Church in both doctrinal and organizational matters as part of a movement called Lollardy (a derogatory term for heresy), which translated the Bible into English and popularized doctrines that anticipated the Reformation. The fourteenth century also saw the development of a mystical tradition in England that carried through to the early fifteenth century and included works still read, such as Richard Rolle's *Form of Perfect Living*, the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton's *Scale* (or *Ladder*) *of Perfection*, Julian (or Juliana) of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, and even the emotionally autobiographical *Book of Margery Kempe*, more valuable for its insights into medieval life (and Margery's psyche) than for its spiritual content. Four cycles of mystery plays, which dramatized the history of the world as recorded in Scripture, and various morality plays such as *Everyman*, which allegorized the human struggle between good and evil, were the forerunners of the great English dramatic tradition from Shakespeare onward.

The late fourteenth century saw a blossoming of alliterative, unrhymed English poetry that was a development of the native tradition of versification stretching back to Anglo-Saxon times. The most important work of that revival was William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which echoes much of the intellectual and social ferment of the time. Another important work was the *Morte Arthure*, an alliterative account of the life and death of King Arthur that anticipated other works on the subject, including Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (printed by William Caxton in 1485), Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859–88), Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Leowe's musical *Camelot* (1960, film 1967), the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), and Mike Nichols's musical *Spamalot* (2005). The *Star Wars* series as well as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series have also continued the theme if not the plot and characters. The most highly regarded of the alliterative poems was *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, combining courtly romance, chivalric ideals, moral dilemma, and supernatural folklore, which has been admirably translated into Modern English by J.R.R. Tolkien. Its anonymous author is known as the *Pearl* poet, from the title of another work he wrote.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the greatest poet of Middle English times and one of the greatest of all times in any language, wrote in both French and English, but his significant work is in English. By the time Chaucer died in 1400, English was well established as the language of England in literary and other uses. By the end of the fourteenth century, public documents and records began to be written in English, and Henry IV used English to claim the throne in 1399.

FOREIGN INFLUENCES ON VOCABULARY

During the Middle English period, Latin continued to exert an important influence on the English vocabulary (Chapter 12, 279). Scandinavian loanwords that must have started making their way into the language during the Old English period became readily apparent in Middle English (281–83), and Dutch and Flemish were also significant sources (289–90). However the major new influence, and ultimately the most important, was French (283–5).

The impact of the Norman Conquest on the English language, like that made by the earlier Norse-speaking invaders, was largely in the word stock, though Middle English also showed some instances of the influence of French idiom and grammar. Suffice it to say that, as a result of the Conquest, English acquired a new look.

Compare the following pairs, in which the first word or phrase is from an Old English translation of the parable of the Prodigal Son (cited at the end of Chapter 5) and the second is from a Middle English translation (cited at the end of this chapter):

Old English	Middle English	
æhta	catel	'property'
burhsittende man	citeseyn	'citizen'
dæl	porcioun	'portion'
dælde	departide	'divided'
forwearð	perischid	'perished'
gælsa	lecherously	'lechery, lecherously'
genōh	plente	'enough, plenty'
gewilnode	coueitide	'wanted, coveted'
gewistfullian	make we feeste	'let us feast'
mildheortness	mercy	'mercy'
rice	cuntre	'country'
þēow	seruaunt	'servant'
wræclīce	in pilgrymage	'abroad, traveling'

In each case, the first expression is native English and the second is, or contains, a word borrowed from French. In a few instances, the corresponding Modern English expression is different from either of the older forms: though Middle English *catel* survives as *cattle*, its meaning has become more specific than it was; and so has that of Middle English *pilgrymage*, which now refers to a particular kind of journey. However, most of the French terms have continued essentially unchanged in present-day use. The French tincture of our vocabulary, which began in Middle English times, has been intensified in Modern English.

MIDDLE ENGLISH SPELLING

CONSONANTS

Just as French words were borrowed, so too were French spelling conventions. Yet some of the apparent innovations in Middle English spelling were, in fact, a return to earlier conventions. For example, the digraph *th* had been used in some of the earliest English texts—those written before 900—but was replaced in later Old English writing by *þ* and *ð*. During the Middle English period, *th* was gradually reintroduced, and during early Modern English times printers regularized its use. Similarly, *uu*, used for [w] in early manuscripts, was supplanted by the runic wynn, *ƿ*, but *uu* was brought back to England by Norman scribes in a ligatured form as *w*. The origin of this symbol is accurately indicated by its name, *double-u*.

    Other new spellings were true innovations. The Old English symbol *ᵹ* (which we transliterate as *g*) was an Irish shape; the letter shape *g* entered English writing later from the Continent. In Middle English times, the Old English symbol acquired a somewhat different form, *ȝ* (called yogh), and was used for several sounds, notably two that came to be spelled *y* and *gh* later in the period. The complex history of these shapes and the sounds they represented is illustrated by the spellings of the following five words:

	Goose	Yield	Draw	Knight	Through
OE:	gōs [g]	geldan [y]	dragan [ɣ]	cniht [ç]	þurh [x]
ME:	goos [g]	ȝelden [y]	drawen [w]	cniȝt [ç]	þurȝ [x]
		or yelden		*or* knight	*or* thurgh

    The symbol yogh (ȝ) was also used to represent *-s* or *-z* at the ends of words in some manuscripts, such as those of the *Pearl* poet, perhaps because it resembles *z* in shape. It continued to be written in Scotland long after the English had given it up, and printers, having no ȝ in their fonts, used *z* for it—as in the names *Kenzie* (compare *Kenny*, with revised spelling to indicate a pronunciation somewhat closer to the historical one) and *Menzies* (with the Scottish pronunciation [mɪŋgɪs]). The newly borrowed shape *g* was used to represent not only [g] in native words, but also the [ǰ] sound in French loanwords like *gem* and *age*, that being the sound represented by *g* before *e* and *i* of French in earlier times.

    The consonant sound [v] did not occur initially in Old English, which used *f* for the [v] that developed internally, as in *drifen* 'driven,' *hæfde* 'had,' and *scofl* 'shovel.' Except for a very few words that have entered standard English from Southern English dialects, in which initial [f] became [v]—for instance, *vixen*, the feminine of *vox* 'fox'—no standard English words of native origin begin with [v]. Practically all our words with initial *v* have been taken from Latin or French. No matter how familiar such words as *vulgar* (Latin), *vocal* (Latin), *very* (French), and *voice* (French) may be to us now, they were originally foreign. The introduction of the letter *v* (a variant of *u*) to indicate the

prehistoric Old English development of [f] to [v] was an innovation of Anglo-Norman scribes in Middle English times: thus the Middle English form of Old English *drifen* was written *driven* or *driuen*.

When *v*, the angular form of curved *u*, came to be used in Middle English, scribes followed the Continental practice of using either symbol for either consonant or vowel. As a general rule, *v* was used initially and *u* elsewhere, regardless of the sound indicated, as in *very*, *vsury* (*usury*), and *euer* (*ever*), except in the neighborhood of *m* and *n*, where for the sake of legibility *v* was frequently used for the vowel regardless of position.

Ch was used under French influence, to indicate the initial sound of *child*, which in Old English had been spelled simply with *c*, as in *cild*. Following a short vowel, the same sound might also be spelled *cch* or *chch*; thus *catch* appears as *cache*, *cacche*, and *cachche*.

In early Old English times *sc* symbolized [sk], but during the course of the Old English period the graphic sequence came to indicate [š]. The *sh* spelling for that sound was an innovation of Anglo-Norman scribes (OE *sceal*—ME and ModE *shall*); the scribes sometimes used *s*, *ss*, and *sch* for the same purpose.

Middle English scribes preferred the spelling *wh* for the phonetically more accurate *hw* used in Old English times, for example, in Old English *hwæt*—Middle and Modern English *what*.

Under French influence, scribes in Middle English times used *c* before *e* and *i* (*y*) in French loanwords, for example, *citee* 'city' and *grace*. In Old English writing *c* never indicated [s], but only [k] and [č]. Thus, with the introduction of the newer French value, *c* remained an ambiguous symbol, though in a different way: it came to represent [k] before *a*, *o*, *u*, and consonants, and [s] before *e*, *i*, and *y*. *K*, used occasionally in Old English writing, thus came to be increasingly used before *e*, *i*, and *y* in Middle English times (OE *cynn* 'race'—ME *kin*, *kyn*).

French scribal practices are responsible for the Middle English spelling *qu* (which French inherited from Latin), replacing Old English *cw*, as in *quellen* 'to kill' and *queen*, which despite their French look are native English words (in Old English, *cwellan* and *cwēn*).

Also French in origin is the digraph *gg* for [ǰ], supplanting in medial and final positions Old English *cg* (OE *ecg*—ME *egge*), later written *dg(e)*, as in Modern English *edge*.

Vowels

To indicate vowel length, Middle English writing frequently doubled letters, particularly *ee* and *oo*, the practice becoming general in the East Midland dialect late in the period. These particular doublings have survived into our own day, though they do not indicate the same sounds as in Middle English. As a matter of fact, both *ee* and *oo* were ambiguous in the Middle English period, as every student of Chaucer must learn. One of the vowel sounds indicated by Middle English *ee* (namely [ɛ:]) came generally to be written *ea* in the course of the sixteenth century; for the other sound (namely [e:]), *ee* was retained,

alongside *ie* and, less frequently, *ei*—spellings that were also used to some extent in Middle English.

Double *o* came to be commonly used in later Middle English times for the long rounded vowel [ɔ:], the vowel that developed out of Old English long *ā*. Unfortunately for the beginning student, the same double *o* was used for the continuation of Old English long *ō*. As a result of this duplication, *rood* 'rode' (OE *rād*) and *rood* 'rood, cross' (OE *rōd*) were written with identical vowel symbols, though they were no more nearly alike in pronunciation then ([rɔ:d] and [ro:d] respectively) than are their modern forms ([rod] and [rud] respectively).

Because [ɛ:] and [ɔ:] are both lower vowels than [e:] and [o:] and thus are made with the mouth in a more open position, they are called **open** *e* and **open** *o*, as distinct from the second pair, which are **close** *e* and **close** *o*. In modern transcriptions of Middle English spelling, the open vowels may be indicated by a subscript hook under the letter: *ę̄* for [ɛ:] and *ǭ* for [ɔ:], whereas the close vowels are left unmarked except for length: *ē* for [e:] and *ō* for [o:]. The length mark and the hook are both modern scholarly devices to indicate pronunciation; they were not used by scribes in Middle English times, and the length mark is unnecessary when a long vowel is spelled with double vowel letters, which indicate the extra length of the sound.

Final unstressed *e* following a single consonant also indicated vowel length in Middle English, as in *fode* 'food' and *fede* 'to feed'; this corresponds to the "silent *e*" of Modern English, as in *case, mete, bite, rote,* and *rule*. Doubled consonants, which indicated consonant length in earlier periods, began in Middle English times to indicate also that a preceding vowel was short. Surviving examples are *dinner* and *bitter*, as contrasted with *diner* and *biter*. In the North of England, *i* was frequently used after a vowel to indicate that it was long, a practice responsible for such modern spellings as *raid* (literally a 'riding,' from the OE noun *rād*), *Reid* (a long-vowel variant of *red*, surviving only as a proper name), and Scots *guid* 'good,' as in Robert Burns's "Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous."

Short *u* was commonly written *o* during the latter part of the Middle English period if *i, m, n,* or *u* (*v, w*) were contiguous, because those stroke letters were made with parallel slanting lines and so, when written in succession, could not be distinguished. A Latin orthographical joke about "minimi mimi" ('very small mimes or dwarf actors') was written solely with those letters and consequently was illegible. The Middle English spellings *sone* 'son' and *sonne* 'sun' thus indicate the same vowel sound [ʊ] that these words had in Old English, when they were written respectively *sunu* and *sunne*. The spelling *o* for *u* survives in a number of Modern English words besides *son*— for example, *come* (OE *cuman*), *wonder* (OE *wundor*), *monk* (OE *munuc*), *honey* (OE *hunig*), *tongue* (OE *tunge*), and *love* (OE *lufu*), the last of which, if it had not used the *o* spelling, would have been written *luue* (as indeed it was for a time).

The French spelling *ou* came to be used generally in the fourteenth century to represent English long *ū*—for example, *hous* (OE *hūs*). Before a vowel the *u* of the digraph *ou* might well be mistaken as representing [v], for which the

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same symbol was used. To avoid confusion (as in *douer*, which was a possible writing for both *dower* and *Dover*), *u* was doubled in this position—that is, written *uu*, later *w*. This use of *w*, of course, would have been unnecessary if *u* and *v* had been differentiated as they are now. W came to be used instead of *u* also in final position.

Middle English scribes used *y* for the semivowel [y] and also, for the sake of legibility, as a variant of *i* in the vicinity of stroke letters—for example, *myn hom-comynge* 'my homecoming.' Late in the Middle English period there was a tendency to write *y* for long *ī* generally. Y was also regularly used in final position.

Middle English spelling was considerably more relaxed than present-day orthography. The foregoing remarks describe some of the spelling conventions of Middle English scribes, but there were a good many others, and all of them were used with a nonchalance that is hardly imaginable after the introduction of the printing press. Within a few lines, a scribe might spell both *water* and *watter*, *treese* and *tres* 'trees,' *nakid* and *nakyd* 'naked,' *eddre* and *edder* 'adder,' *moneth* and *moneþ* 'month,' *clowdes* and *cloudeȝ* 'clouds,' as did the scribe who copied out a manuscript of the Wycliffite Bible. The notion that every word has, or ought to have, just one correct spelling is relatively recent and certainly never occurred to our medieval ancestors.

THE RISE OF A LONDON STANDARD

Middle English had a diversity of dialects. Its Northern dialect corresponds roughly to Old English Northumbrian, its southern boundary on the eastern coast being also the Humber estuary. Likewise, the Midland dialects, subdivided into East Midland and West Midland, correspond roughly to Old English Mercian. The Southern dialect, spoken south of the Thames, similarly corresponds roughly to West Saxon, with Kentish a subdivision.

In William Caxton's 1490 Preface to Virgil's *Eneydos*, the pioneering London printer and book retailer told his now famous egg story about the confusion that can arise owing to differences in dialectal diction, in this case between the Middle English word for *eggs*, "eyren," and the Norse word for *eggs*, "eggys" that was found in the Northern dialect. The story goes that some merchants sailing for Zealand were delayed by "lacke of wynde" and so disembarked for the nearest public house on the Thames, where one of them named Sheffield, likely a north-country man, "axyd after eggys," but the London woman taking his order couldn't understand what he meant by "eggys" and told him that she couldn't speak French. Finally, another merchant intervened, saying that his friend wanted "eyren," at which point the "good wyf" said she understood him well, and Sheffield got his eggs. Caxton observed, "Englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother.... Certainly it is harde to playse euery man / by cause of dyuersite & change of langage" ("Spoken English differs from shire to shire.... It surely is hard to please every person because language is diverse and ever-changing").

It is not surprising that London speech—essentially East Midland in its characteristics, though showing Northern and to a less extent Southern influences—should in time have become a standard for all of England. London

had for centuries been a large (by medieval standards), prosperous, and hence important city.

Until the late fifteenth century, however, authors wrote in the dialect of their native regions. The authors of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Piers Plowman* wrote in the West Midland dialect; the authors of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the *Ancrene Riwle*, and the *Ayenbite of Inwit* wrote in the Southern dialect (including Kentish); the author of the *Bruce* wrote in the Northern dialect; *The Ladder of Perfection*'s Walter Hilton and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote in the East Midland dialect; and John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer also wrote in the East Midland dialect, specifically the London variety of East Midland. Standard Modern English—both American and British—is a development of the speech of London. This dialect had become the norm in general use long before the English settlement of America in the early seventeenth century, though many of those who migrated to the New World retained traces of their regional origins in their pronunciation, vocabulary, and—to a lesser degree—syntax. Rather than speaking purely local dialects, most used a type of speech that was essentially that of London, with regional shadings.
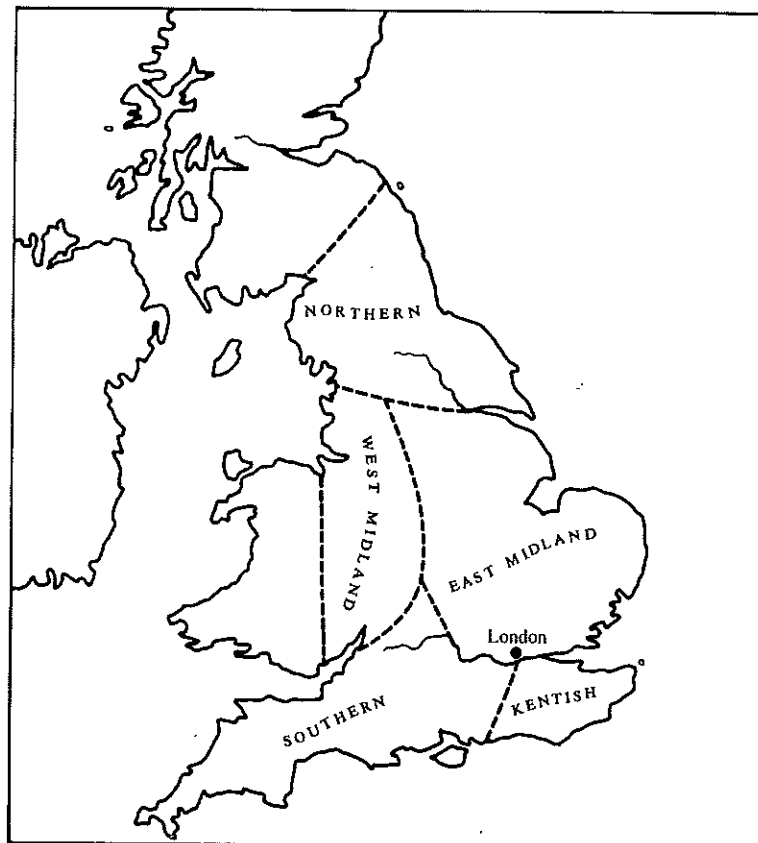
Britain in Middle English Times

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The London origin of our English means that the language of Chaucer and Gower is much easier for us to comprehend at first sight than, say, the Northern speech (specifically lowland Scots) of their contemporary John Barbour, author of the *Bruce*. In the following lines from Chaucer's *House of Fame*, for instance, an erudite eagle explains to Chaucer what speech really is:

> Soune ys noght but eyre ybroken
> And every spech that ys yspoken,
> Lowde or pryvee, foule or faire,
> In his substaunce ys but aire;
> 5 For as flaumbe ys but lyghted smoke,
> Ryght soo soune ys aire y-broke.
> But this may be in many wyse,
> Of which I wil the twoo devyse:
> Of soune that cometh of pipe or harpe.
> 10 For when a pipe is blowen sharpe
> The aire ys twyst with violence
> And rent. Loo, thys ys my sentence.
> Eke, when men harpe strynges smyte,
> Whether hyt be moche or lyte,
> 15 Loo, with the stroke the ayre to-breketh
> And right so breketh it when men speketh:
> Thus wost thou wel what thinge is speche.

Now compare Chaucer's English, much like our own, with that of the following excerpt from the *Bruce*:

> Þan wist he weill þai wald him sla,
> And for he wald his lord succour
> He put his lif in aventur
> And stud intill a busk lurkand
> 5 Quhill þat þe hund com at his hand,
> And with ane arrow soyn hym slew
> And throu the wod syne hym withdrew.

Scots needs to be translated to be easily understood:

> Then he knew well they wished to slay him,
> And because he wished to succor his lord
> He put his life in fortune's hands
> And stood lurking in a bush
> 5 While the hound came to his hand,
> And with one arrow immediately slew him
> And through the wood afterward withdrew himself.

Distinctively Northern forms in this passage are *slā* (corresponding to East Midland *slee*), *wald* (E. Midl. *wolde[n]*), *stud* (E. Midl. *sto[o]d*), *weill* (in which the *i* indicates length of the preceding *e*), *lurkand* (E. Midl. *lurking*), *quhill* (E. Midl. *whȳl*), *āne* (E. Midl. *oon* [ɔːn]), *intill* (E. Midl. *intō*), and *syne* (E. Midl. *sith*). *Soyn* 'soon, immediately' is merely a matter of spelling: the *y*, like the *i* in *weill*, indicates length of the preceding vowel, and not a pronunciation of the vowel different from that indicated by the usual East Midland

spelling *sone*. The nominative form of the third person plural pronoun, *þai* 'they,' was adopted in the North from Scandinavian and gradually spread into the other dialects. The **oblique forms** (i.e., non-nominative cases) *their* and *them* were not generally used in London English or in the Midland and South at this time, though they were common enough in the North. Chaucer uses *they* for the nominative, but he retains the native forms *here* (or *hire*) and *hem* as oblique forms. A Northern characteristic not illustrated in the passage cited is the *-es*, *-is*, or *-ys* verb ending of the third person singular and all plural forms of the present indicative (*he redys* 'he reads,' *thai redys* 'they read'). Also Northern, but not occurring in the passage, is the frequent correspondence of *k* to the *ch* of the other dialects, as in *birk–birch* 'birch,' *kirk–chirche* 'church,' *mikel–michel* 'much,' and *ilk–eech* 'each.'

Throughout this chapter, the focus of attention is on London speech, which is the ancestor of standard Modern English, rather than on other dialects like that of the *Bruce*.

CHANGES IN PRONUNCIATION

PRINCIPAL CONSONANT CHANGES

Throughout the history of English, consonants have remained relatively stable, compared with the notable vowel changes that have occurred. The Old English consonant sounds written *b*, *c* (in both its values in late Old English, [k] and [č]), *d*, *f* (in both its values, [f] and [v]), ȝ (in two of its values, [g] and [y]), *h* (in both its values, [h] and [x]), *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *p*, *r*, *s*, *t*, *þ* (*ð*), *w*, and *x* (i.e., [ks]) remained unchanged in Middle English. Important spelling differences occur, however, most of them due to Anglo-Norman influence. They have been treated earlier in this chapter.

The more important changes in consonant sounds, other than the part played by *g* in the formation of new diphthongs (135–6), may be summarized as follows:

1. The Old English sequences *hl*, *hn*, and *hr* (as in *hlēapan* 'to leap,' *hnutu* 'nut,' and *hraðor* 'sooner') were simplified to *l*, *n*, and *r* (*lēpen*, *nute*, *rather*). To some extent *hw*, written *wh* in Middle English, was also frequently reduced to *w*, at least in the Southern dialect. In the North, however, the *h* in this sequence was not lost. It survives to this day in some types of English, including the speech of parts of the United States. The sequence was frequently written *qu* and *quh* in Northern texts.

2. The Old English voiced velar fricative *g* after *l* or *r* became *w*, as in *halwen* 'to hallow' (OE *halgian*) and *morwe(n)* 'morrow' (OE *morgen*).

3. Between a consonant, particularly *s* or *t*, and a back vowel, *w* was lost, as in *sǭ* (OE *swā*) and *tō* 'two' (OE *twā*). Since Old English times, it had been lost in various negative contractions regardless of what vowel followed, as in Middle English *nil(le)* from *ne wil(le)*, *nǫt* from *ne wǫt*, *nas* from *ne was*, and *niste* from *ne wiste* (in which the *w* was postconsonantal because of elision of the *e* of *ne*). *Nille* survives in *willy-nilly*. A number of spellings

with "silent *w*" continue to occur—for example, *two, sword,* and *answer* (early ME *andswarien*).

4. In unstressed syllables, -*ch* was lost in late Middle English, as in -*ly* (OE -*lic*). The form *ī* for the first person nominative singular pronoun is a restressing of the simple *i* that remained of *ich* (OE *ic*) after this loss.

5. Before a consonant, sometimes with syncope of an unstressed vowel, *v* was lost in a few words like *hēd* (by way of *hēvd, hēved,* from OE *hēafod*), *lōrd* (*lōverd,* OE *hlāford*), *hast, hath,* and *had* (OE *hæfst, bæfð,* and *hæfde*).

6. The Old English prefix *ge-* became *i-* (*y-*), as in *iwis* 'certain' (OE *gewiss*) and *ilimpen* 'to happen' (OE *gelimpan*).

7. Final inflectional *n* was gradually lost, as was the final *n* of the unstressed possessive pronouns *mīn* and *þīn* and of the indefinite article before a consonant: compare Old English *mīn fæder* 'my father' with Middle English *mȳ fader* (but *mȳn eye* 'my eye'). This loss of -*n* is indirectly responsible for *a newt* (from *an ewte*) and *a nickname* (from *an ekename* 'an also-name'), where the *n* of the indefinite article has attached itself to the following word. In *umpire* (ME *noumpere*), *adder* (ME *nadder,* compare German *Natter* 'snake'), *auger* (ME *nauger*), and *apron* (ME *napron,* compare *napkin, napery* 'table linen') just the opposite has happened: the *n* of the noun attached itself to the article.

8. In the Southern dialect, including Kentish, initial *f, s,* and doubtless *þ* as well, were voiced. Voicing was noted as current in some of the Southern counties of England by Joseph Wright in his *English Dialect Grammar* and is reflected in such standard English words of Southern provenience as *vixen* 'she-fox' (OE *fyxe*) and *vat* (OE *fæt*).

9. Many words were borrowed from Old French (and less frequently from Latin) beginning with [v] (for instance, *veal, virtue, visit*) and later with [z] (for instance, *zeal, zodiac*). As a result, these sounds frequently appeared in initial position, where they had not occurred in Old English.

10. Initial [θ] in words usually unstressed (for instance, *the, this, they*) was voiced to [ð].

11. With the eventual loss of final -*e* [ə] (138–9), [v], [z], and [ð] came to occur also in final position, as in *give, lose, bathe*.

As a result of the last four changes, the voiced fricatives, which in Old English had been mere allophones of the voiceless ones, achieved phonemic status.

MIDDLE ENGLISH VOWELS

The Old English long vowel sounds *ē, ī, ō,* and *ū* remained unchanged in Middle English although their spelling possibilities altered: thus Old English *fēt,* Middle English *fēt, feet* 'feet'; OE *rīdan,* ME *rīden, rȳden* 'to ride'; OE *fōda,* ME *fōde, foode* 'food'; OE *hūs,* ME *hous* 'house.'

Except for Old English *æ* and *y,* the short vowels of those Old English stressed syllables that remained short were unchanged in most Middle English speech—for example, OE *wascan* 'to wash,' ME *washen*; OE *helpan* 'to help,'

ME *helpen*; OE *sittan* 'to sit,' ME *sitten*; OE *hoppian* 'to hop,' ME *hoppen*; and OE *hungrig* 'hungry,' ME *hungry*. The rest of the vowels underwent the following changes:

1. Old English *ȳ* [ü:] underwent **unrounding** to [i:] in the Northern and the East Midland areas. It remained unchanged, though written *u* or *ui*, in the greater part of the West Midland and all of the Southwest until the later years of the fourteenth century, when it was unrounded there also. In the Southeast, the Old English sound became [e:]. Hence Old English *hȳdan* 'to hide' is reflected in Middle English in such dialect variants as *hīden*, *hūden*, and *hëden*.

2. In the Northern and East Midland areas, Old English *y* [ü] was unrounded to [ɪ], exactly as *ȳ* [ü:] was unrounded to [i:] in the same areas. In the Southeast it became *e*; but in the West Midland and the Southwest, it remained as a rounded vowel [ü], written *u*, until late Middle English times, when it was unrounded.

3. Old English *ā* remained only in the North (*hām* 'home,' *rāp* 'rope,' *stān* 'stone'), becoming [e:] in Modern Scots, as in *hame*, *rape*, and *stane*. Everywhere south of the Humber, *ā* became [ɔ:] and was spelled *o* or *oo* exactly like the [o:] that remained from Old English, as in *fo(o)de*. To be sure how to pronounce a Middle English word spelled with *o(o)*, one needs to know its Old English form; if the Old English was *ā* (ME *stǫǫn*, OE *stān*), the Middle English sound is [ɔ:]; if the Old English was *ō* (ME *root(e)*, OE *rōt*), the Middle English sound is unchanged [o:]. But there is an easier way for the beginning student of Middle English literature, who may not be familiar with Old English, and it is fairly certain: if the modern sound is [o], typically spelled *o* with "silent *e*" (as in *roe*, *rode*) or *oa* (as in *road*), then the Middle English sound is [ɔ:]. If, however, the Modern English sound is [u], [ʊ], or [ə], spelled *oo*, the Middle English sound is [o:], as in, respectively, Modern English *food*, *foot*, and *flood*, going back to Middle English [fo:də], [fo:t], and [flo:d].

   There are, however, some special or exceptional cases. The Middle English [o:] of *twō* (OE *twā*) and *whō* (OE *hwā*) developed from early Middle English [ɔ:] by assimilation to the preceding [w], which was then lost (as observed above in item 3 on consonant changes, 132). Thus Old English *twā* and *hwā* regularly became early Middle English [twɔ:] and [hwɔ:], which assimilated to later Middle English [to:] and [ho:], the sources of Modern English *two* [tu] and *who* [hu] (spelling preserves the now archaic forms from early Middle English).

   Another exception is *Rome*, which had [o:] in Middle English and [u] in early Modern English, rhyming with *doom* and *room* in the poetry of Pope and Dryden. That earlier pronunciation of *Rome* is indicated by Shakespeare's pun in *Julius Caesar*: "Now is it Rome indeed, and room enough." The change back to [rom] occurred in fairly recent times, probably influenced by the pronunciation of the place-name in other languages. *Brooch* [broč] is an exceptional instance of *oo* as a spelling for [o] from Middle English [ɔ:]. A spelling pronunciation [bruč] is occasionally heard.

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4. Old English [æ:] became Middle English [ɛ:]. Both [e:] and [ɛ:] were written *e* or *ee* in Middle English. In early Modern English times, *ea* was adopted as a spelling for most of those words that in the Middle English dialects spoken north of the Thames had [ɛ:], whereas in the same dialects those words that had [e:] usually continued the Middle English *e(e)* spelling. This difference in spelling is a great blessing to beginning students of Chaucer. By it they can know that *swete breeth* in the fifth line of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* is to be read [swe:tə brɛ:θ]. The Modern English spellings *sweet* and *breath* here, as often, provide the clue to the Middle English pronunciation.

5. Old English short *æ* fell together with short *a* and came to be written like it in Middle English: Old English *glæd* became Middle English *glad*. In Southwest Midland and in Kentish, however, words that in Old English had short *æ* were written with *e* (for instance, *gled*) in early Middle English times—a writing that may have indicated little change from the Old English sound in those areas.

CHANGES IN DIPHTHONGS

Diphthongs changed radically between Old English and Middle English. The old diphthongs disappeared and a number of new ones ([aɪ, eɪ, aʊ, ɔʊ, ɛʊ, ɪʊ, ɔɪ, ʊɪ]) developed:

1. The Old English long diphthongs *ēa* and *ēo* underwent smoothing or monophthongization in late Old English times (eleventh century), becoming [ɛ:] and [e:] respectively. Their subsequent Modern English development coincided with that of [ɛ:] and [e:] from other origins. Thus Middle English *lęęf* 'leaf' [lɛ:f] develops out of Old English *lēaf* and *seen* 'to see' [se:n] out of Old English *sēon*.

   The short diphthongs *ea* and *eo* became, respectively, *a* and *e*, as in Middle English *yaf* 'gave' from Old English *geaf*, and *herte* 'heart' from Old English *heorte*.

2. In early Middle English, two new diphthongs ending in the offglide [ɪ]—[aɪ] and [eɪ]—developed from Old English sources, a development that had in fact begun in late Old English times. One source of this development was the vocalization of *g* to *i* after front vowels (OE *sægde* 'said,' ME *saide*; OE *weg* 'way,' ME *wey*). Another source was the development of an *i*-glide between a front vowel and Old English *h*, which represented a voiceless fricative when it did not begin words (late OE *ehta* 'eight,' ME *eighte*). In late Middle English, the two diphthongs [aɪ] and [eɪ] fell together and became a single diphthong, as we know, for example, from the fact that Chaucer rhymes words like *day* (earlier [daɪ]) and *wey* (earlier [weɪ]). When the off-glide followed *i*, it served merely to lengthen that vowel (OE *lige* 'falsehood,' ME *lie*).

3. Four new diphthongs ending in the off-glide [ʊ]—[aʊ], [ɔʊ], [ɛʊ], and [ɪʊ]—also developed from Old English sources. The vocalization of *g* (the voiced velar fricative) to *u* after back vowels contributed to the first two of

these new diphthongs (OE *sagu* 'saw, saying,' ME *sawe*; OE *boga* 'bow,' ME *bowe*). Another source for the same two diphthongs was the development of a *u*-glide between a back vowel and Old English *h* (OE *āht* 'aught,' ME *aught*; OE *brohte* 'brought,' ME *broughte*). A third source contributed to all four diphthongs: *w* after a vowel became a *u*-glide but continued usually to be written (OE *clawu* 'claw,' ME *clawe*; OE *growan* 'to grow,' ME *growen*; OE *lǣwede* 'unlearned,' ME *lewed*; OE *nīwe* 'new,' ME *newe*). Diphthongization often involved a new concept of syllable division—for example, Old English *clawu* [kla-wʊ] but Middle English *clawe* [klau-ə]. When the off-glide followed *u*, it merely lengthened it (OE *fugol* 'fowl,' ME *foul* [fu:l]).

4. Two Middle English diphthongs are of French origin, entering our language in loanwords borrowed from the French-speaking conquerors of England. The diphthong [ɔɪ] is spelled *oi* or *oy*, as in *joie* 'joy' or *cloystor* 'cloister.' The diphthong [ʊɪ] is also spelled *oi* or *oy*, as in *boilen* 'to boil' or *poyson* 'poison.' Words containing the second diphthong have [əɪ] in early Modern English—pronunciations that have survived in nonstandard speech and are reflected in the dialect spellings *bile* and *pizen*. (Eric John Dobson 2:810–26 treats this complex subject at length.)

Just as Old English diphthongs were smoothed into Middle English monophthongs, so some new Middle English diphthongs have, in turn, undergone smoothing in Modern English (for instance, ME *drawen* [drauən], ModE *draw* [drɔ]). The process of smoothing still goes on: some inland Southern American speakers lack off-glides in [aɪ], so that "my wife" comes out as something very like [ma waf], and the off-glide may also be lost in *oil*, *boil*, and the like. On the other hand, new diphthongs have also developed: for instance, ME *rīden* [ri:dən], ModE *ride* [raɪd]; ME *hous* [hu:s], ModE *house* [haʊs]. And others continue to develop: [ʊ] and [ɪ] off-glides occur in words like *boat* and *bait*, and some American dialects have glides in words like *head* [hɛəd] and *bad* [bæɪd].

LENGTHENING AND SHORTENING OF VOWELS

In addition to the qualitative vowel changes mentioned above, there were some important quantitative changes, that is, changes in the length of vowels:

1. In late Old English times, originally short vowels were lengthened before *mb, nd, ld, rd*, and *rð*. This **lengthening** frequently failed to maintain itself, and by the end of the Middle English period lengthening is to be found only with *i* and *o* before *mb* (*climben* 'to climb,' *cōmb* 'comb'); with *i* and *u* before *nd* (*binden* 'to bind,' *bounden* 'bound'); and generally before *ld* (*mīlde* 'mild,' *yēlden* 'to pay, yield,' *ōld* 'old'). Reshortening has subsequently occurred, however, in some words—for instance, *wind* (noun), *held, send, friend*; compare *wind* (verb), *field, fiend*, in which the lengthening survives. If another consonant followed any of the sequences mentioned, lengthening did not occur; this fact explains Modern English *child–children*, from OE *cild–cildru* (nominative-accusative plural), both with short vowels.

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2. Considerably later than the lengthenings due to the consonant sequences just discussed, short *a*, *e*, and *o* were lengthened when they were in open syllables, that is, in syllables in which they were followed by a single consonant plus another vowel, such as *bāken* 'to bake' (OE *bacan*). In Old English, short vowels frequently occurred in such syllables—for example, *nama* 'name,' *stelan* 'to steal,' *prote* 'throat,' which became in Middle English, respectively, *nāme, stẹlen, thrọte*. This lengthening is reflected in the plural of *staff* (from ME *staf*, going back to OE *stæf*): *staves* (from ME *stāves*, going back to OE *stafas*). Short *i* (*y*) and *u* were likewise lengthened in open syllables, beginning in the fourteenth century in the North, but these vowels underwent a qualitative change also: *i (y)* became *ē*, and *u* became *ō*—for example, Old English *wicu* 'week,' *yvel* 'evil,' *wudu* 'wood,' which became, respectively, *wēke, ēvel, wōde*. This lengthening in open syllables was a new principle in English. Its results are still apparent, as in *staff* and *staves*, though the distinction between open and closed syllables disappeared in such words with the loss of final unstressed *e*, as a result of which the vowels of, say, *staves, week*, and *throat* now occur in closed syllables: [stevz], [wik], [θrot].

3. Conversely, beginning in the Old English period, originally long vowels in syllables followed by certain consonant sequences were shortened. The consonant sequences that caused **shortening** included lengthened (doubled) consonants but naturally excluded those sequences that lengthened a preceding vowel, mentioned above under item 1. For example, there is shortening in *hidde* 'hid' (OE *hȳdde*), *kepte* 'kept' (OE *cēpte*), *fifty* (OE *fīftig*), *fiftēne* (OE *fīftȳne*), *twenty* (OE *twēntig*), and *wisdom* (OE *wīsdōm*). It made no difference whether the consonant sequence was in the word originally (as in OE *sōfte*, ME *softe*), was the result of adding an inflectional ending (as in *hidde*), or was the result of compounding (as in OE *wīsdōm*). The effects of this shortening can be seen in the following Modern English pairs, in which the first member has an originally long vowel and the second has a vowel that was shortened: *hide–hid, keep–kept, five–fifty*, and *wise–wisdom*. There was considerable wavering in vowel length before the sequence *-st*, as indicated by such Modern English forms as *Christ–fist, ghost–lost*, and *least–breast*.

4. Vowels in unstressed syllables were shortened. Lack of stress on the second syllable of *wisdom* accounts for its Middle English shortening from the Old English *dōm* ('condition, power, dominion'). Similarly, words that were usually without stress within the sentence were subject to vowel shortening—for example, *an* (OE *ān* 'one'), *but* (OE *būtan*), and *not* (OE *nāwiht*).

5. Shortening also occurred regularly before two unstressed syllables, as reflected in *wild–wilderness, Christ–Christendom*, and *holy–holiday*.

Leveling of Unstressed Vowels

As far as the grammar of English is concerned, the most significant of all phonological developments in the language was the falling together of *a*, *o*,

and *u* with *e* in unstressed syllables, all ultimately becoming [ə], as in the following:

Old English	Middle English
lama 'lame'	lāme
faran 'to fare,' faren (past part.)	fāren
stānes 'stone's,' stānas 'stones'	stǫnes
feallað 'falleth'	falleth
nacod 'naked'	nāked
macodon 'made' (pl.)	mākeden
sicor 'sure'	sēker
lengðu 'length'	lengthe
medu 'liquor'	mẹde

This **leveling**, or **merging**, was alluded to in the last chapter, for it began well before the end of the Old English period. The *Beowulf* manuscript (ca. A.D. 1000), for instance, has occurrences of *-as* for the genitive singular *-es* ending, *-an* for both the preterit plural ending *-on* and the dative plural ending *-um* (the *-m* in *-um* had become *-n* late in the Old English period), *-on* for the infinitive ending *-an*, and *-o* for both the genitive plural ending *-a* and the neuter nominative plural ending *-u*, among a number of such interchanges pointing to identical vowel quality in such syllables. The spelling *e* for the merged vowel became normal in Middle English.

LOSS OF SCHWA IN FINAL SYLLABLES

The leveled final *e* [ə] was gradually lost in the North in the course of the thirteenth century and in the Midlands and the South somewhat later. Many words, however, continued to be spelled with *-e*, even when it was no longer pronounced. Because a word like *rīd(e)* (OE *rīdan*) was for a time pronounced either with or without its final [ə], other words like *brīd(e)* (OE *brȳd*) acquired by analogy an optional inorganic *-e* in both spelling and pronunciation. We know that this unhistorical [ə] was pronounced because of the meter of verses, such as Chaucer's "A bryde shal net eten in the halle" (*Canterbury Tales*), in which the scansion of the line of iambic pentameter requires "bryde" to have two syllables. There was also a scribal *-e*, which was not pronounced but merely added to the spelling for various reasons, such as filling out a short line, in the days before English orthography was standardized.

In the inflectional ending *-es*, the unstressed *e* (written *i*, *y*, and *u* in some dialects) was ultimately lost, except after the sibilants [s], [z], [š], [č], and [ǰ]. This loss was a comparatively late development, beginning in the North in the early fourteenth century and in the Midlands and the South somewhat later.

In the West Saxon and Kentish dialects of Old English, *e* was usually lost in the ending *-eð* for the third person singular of the present indicative of verbs. It is hence not surprising to find such loss in this ending in the Southern dialect of Middle English and, after long syllables, in the Midland dialects as well, as in *mākth* 'maketh' *bẹrth* 'beareth,' as also sometimes after short syllables, as in

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comth. Chaucer uses both forms of this ending; sometimes the loss of [ə] is not indicated by the spelling but is dictated by the meter.

The vowel sound was retained in *-ed* until the fifteenth century. It has not yet disappeared in the forms *aged*, *blessed*, and *learned* in some of the instances when they are used as adjectives. Compare *learnëd woman, the blessëd Lord,* and *agëd man* with "The woman learned the truth," "The Lord blessed the multitude," and "The man aged rapidly." The vowel of *-ed* is also still retained after *t* or *d*, as in *heated* or *heeded*.

CHANGES IN GRAMMAR

REDUCTION OF INFLECTIONS

As a result of the merging of unstressed vowels into a single sound, the number of distinct inflectional endings in English was drastically reduced. Middle English became a language with few inflectional distinctions, whereas Old English, as we have seen, was relatively highly inflected, although less so than Proto-Germanic. This reduction of inflections was responsible for a structural change of the greatest importance.

Old English weak adjectives (those used after the demonstratives) had the endings *-a* (masculine nominative) and *-e* (neuter nominative-accusative and feminine nominative); in Middle English, those endings fell together as *-e*. Thus an indication of gender was lost. Middle English *the ọlde man* (OE *se ealda man*) has the same adjective ending as *the ọlde tale* (OE feminine *sēo ealde talu*) and *the ọlde sword* (OE neuter *þæt ealde sweord*). The Old English weak adjective endings *-an* and *-um* had already fallen together as *-en*; and with the Middle English loss of final *-n*, they also came to have only *-e*. The Old English weak adjective genitive plural endings *-ena* and *-ra*, after first becoming *-ene* and *-re*, were generally replaced by the predominant weak adjective ending *-e*. Thus the five singular and plural forms of the Old English weak adjective declension (*-a, -e, -an, -ena* or *-ra*, and *-um*) were reduced to a single form ending in *-e*, with gender as well as number distinctions completely obliterated. For the strong adjective, the endingless form of the Old English nominative singular was used throughout the singular, with a generalized plural form (identical with the weak adjective declension) in *-e*: thus (strong singular) *grẹẹt lord* 'great lord' but (generalized plural) *grẹẹte lordes* 'great lords.'

To describe the situation more simply, Middle English monosyllabic adjectives ending in consonants had a single inflection, *-e*, used to modify singular nouns in the weak function and all plural nouns. Other adjectives—for example, *free* and *gentil*—were uninflected. This simple grammatical situation can be inferred from many of the manuscripts only with difficulty, however, because scribes frequently wrote final *e*'s where they did not belong.

Changes resulting from the leveling of vowels in unstressed syllables were considerably more far-reaching than just those in the declension of the adjective. For instance, the older endings *-an* (infinitives and most of the oblique, or non-nominative, forms of *n*-stem nouns), *-on* (indicative preterit plurals), and *-en* (subjunctive preterit plurals and past participles of strong verbs) all fell

together as *-en*. With the later loss of final inflectional *-n* in some of these forms, only *-e* [ə] was left, and in time this was also to go. This loss accounts for endingless infinitives, preterit plurals, and some past participles of strong verbs in Modern English, for instance:

Old English	Middle English	Modern English
findan (inf.)	finde(n)	find
fundon (pret. pl.)	founde(n)	found
funden (past part.)	founde(n)	found

It was similar with the Old English *-as* nominative-accusative plural of the most important declension, which became a pattern for the plural of most nouns, and the *-es* genitive singular of the same declension (OE *hundas* 'hounds' and *hundes* 'hound's' merging as ME *houndes*). So too the noun endings *-eð* and *-að* (OE *hæleð* 'fighting man,' *monað* 'month') and the homophonous endings in verbs (OE *findeð* 'he, she, it finds,' *findað* 'we, you, they find') all ended up as Middle English *-eth*.

LOSS OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER

One of the important results of the leveling of unstressed vowels was the loss of grammatical gender. We have seen how this occurred with the adjective. We have also seen that grammatical gender, for psychological reasons rather than phonological ones, had begun to break down in Old English times as far as the choice of pronouns was concerned (99), as when the English translator of Bede's Latin *Ecclesiastical History* refers to Bertha, the wife of King Ethelbert of Kent, as *hēo* 'she' rather than *hit*, though she is in the same sentence designated as *þæt* (neuter demonstrative used as definite article) *wīf* rather than *sēo wīf*.

In Old English, gender was readily distinguishable in most nouns: masculine nominative-accusative plurals typically ended in *-as*, feminines in *-a*, and short-stemmed neuters in *-u*. In Middle English, on the other hand, all but a handful of nouns acquired the same plural ending, *-es* (from OE *-as*). These changes, coupled with invariable *the* (replacing Old English masculine *se*, neuter *þæt*, and feminine *sēo*), eliminated grammatical gender as a feature of English.

NOUNS, PRONOUNS, AND ADJECTIVES

THE INFLECTION OF NOUNS

The leveling of unstressed vowels also affected noun inflection. The Old English feminine nominative singular form in *-u* fell together with the nominative plural form in *-a*, so singular *denu* 'valley' and plural *dena* 'valleys' both became Middle English *dẹne*. Similarly, the neuter nominative-accusative plurals in *-u* and the genitive plurals in *-a* came to have the same *-e* ending. Then the Middle English ending *-es* (from the Old English nominative-accusative plural ending *-as*) came to be used as a general plural ending for most nouns. So *dẹne* acquired the plural *dẹnes*. In the same way, the genitive singular ending *-es* was extended to most nouns. Thus the genitive singular and the general plural

forms of most nouns fell together and have remained that way ever since. For example, Old English genitive singular *speres* and nominative plural *speru* both became Middle English *spēres*, Modern English *spear's, spears*; and Old English genitive singular *tale* and nominative plural *tala* both became Middle English *tāles*, Modern English *tale's, tales*.

A few *s*-less genitives—feminine nouns and the family-relationship nouns ending in -*r*—remained throughout the period (as in Chaucer's "In hope to stonden in his lady grace" and "by my fader kyn") and survived into early Modern English, along with a few nouns from the Old English *n*-stem declension. Sometimes the genitive -*s* was left off a noun that ended in *s* or that was followed by a word beginning with *s*, just as in present-day "Keats' poems, Dickens' novels." Solely a matter of writing is the occasional modern "for pity sake," which represents the same pronunciation as "for pity's sake."

The few nouns that did not switch to the general plural ending -*es* nevertheless followed the pattern of using the nominative-accusative plural as a general plural form. They include *oxen, deer,* and *feet*. Middle English had a number of plurals in -*(e)n* that have subsequently disappeared—for example, *eyen* 'eyes' and *fọọn* 'foes.' The -*(e)n* was even extended to a few nouns that belonged to the *a*-stem strong declension in Old English—for example, *shoon* 'shoes' (OE *scōs*). A few long-syllabled words that had been neuters in Old English occurred with unchanged plural forms, especially animal names like *sheep, deer,* and *hors*. The most enduring of alternative plurals, however, are those with mutation: *men, feet, geese, teeth, lice,* and *mice*.

During the Middle English period, then, practically all nouns were reduced to two forms, just as in Modern English—one with -*s* and one without it—the -*s* form for the plural and genitive singular and the form without ending for other singular uses. The English language thus acquired a device for indicating plurality without consideration of case—namely, the -*s* ending, which had been in Old English only one of three plural endings in the strong masculine declension. It also lost all trace of any case distinctions except for the genitive, identical in form with the plural. English had come to depend on particles—mainly prepositions and conjunctions—and on word order to express grammatical relations that had previously been expressed by inflection. No longer could one say, as the Anglo-Saxon homilist Ælfric had, "Þās gelæhte se dēma" (literally, 'Those seized the judge') and expect the sentence to be properly understood as 'The judge seized those.' To say this in Middle English, it is necessary that the subject precede the verb, just as in Modern English: "The dēme ilaughte thọs."

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Only personal pronouns retained (as they still do) a considerable degree of their complexity from Old English. They alone have preserved distinctive subject and object case forms, the distinction between accusative and dative having already disappeared in late Old English for the first and second person pronouns.

The dual number of the personal pronouns also virtually disappeared in Middle English. Such a phrase as *git būtū* 'you two both,' occurring in late

Old English, indicates that even then the form *git* had lost much of its idea of twoness and needed the reinforcement of *būtū* 'both.' There was a great deal of variety in the Middle English forms, of which those in the following table are some of the more noteworthy.

	Singular	Plural
First Person		
Nom.	ich, I, ik	wē
Obj.	mē	us
Gen.	mī; mīn	our(e); oures
Second Person		
Nom.	thou	yē
Obj.	thee	you
Gen.	thī; thīn	your(e); youres
Third Person (masculine)		
Nom.	hē	hī, they, thai
Obj.	him, hine	hem, heom, them, thaim, theim
Gen.	his	her(e), their(e); heres, theirs
(feminine)		
Nom.	shē, hō, hyō, hyē, hī, schō, chō, hē	
Obj.	hir(e), her(e), hī	
Gen.	hir(e), her(e); hires	
(neuter)		
Nom.	hit, it	
Obj.	hit, it	
Gen.	his	

The dialects of Middle English used different pronoun forms. For example, *ik* was a Northern form corresponding to *ich* or *I* elsewhere. The nominative forms *they* or *thai* (and other spelling variants such as *thei* and *thay*), derived from Scandinavian, and prevailed in the North and Midlands. The corresponding objective and genitive forms *them, thaim, theim*, and *their* were used principally in the North during most of the Middle English period. The native nominative form *hī* remained current in the Southern dialect, and its corresponding objective and genitive forms *hem, heom*, and *here* were used in both the South and Midlands. Thus in Chaucer's usage, the nominative is *they* but the objective is *hem* and the genitive *here*. Ultimately the Scandinavian forms in *th-* were to prevail; in the generation following Chaucer, they displaced all the native English forms in *h-* except for unstressed *hem*, which we continue to use as *'em*.

The Old English third person masculine accusative *hine* survived into Middle English only in the South; elsewhere the originally dative *him* took over the objective function. The feminine accusative *hī* likewise survived for a while in the same region, but in the later thirteenth century it was supplanted by the

originally dative *hir(e)* or *her(e)*, current elsewhere in objective use. The feminine pronoun had a variety of nominative forms, one of them identical with the corresponding masculine form—certainly an awkward state of affairs, forcing the lovesick male author of the lyric "Alysoun" to refer to his sweetheart as *hē*, the same form that she would have used in referring to him (for example, "Bote he me wolle to hire take" means 'Unless she will take me to her'). The predominant form in East Midland speech, and the one that was to survive in standard Modern English, was *shē*.

The genitive forms of the personal pronouns came in Middle English to be restricted in the ways they could be used. A construction like Old English *nǣnig hira* 'none of them' could be rendered in Middle English only by *of* plus the objective pronoun, exactly as in Modern English. The variant forms of the genitive first and second persons singular—*mīn, mī; thīn, thī*—preceding a noun were in exactly the same type of distribution as the forms *an* and *a*; that is, the final *n* was lost before a consonant. The forms with *-n* were used after nouns (as in the rare construction "baby mine") and nominally (as in Modern English "That book is mine," "Mine is that book," and "that book of mine"). Similar forms in *-n* were created by analogy for other pronouns: *hisen, heren, ouren, youren,* and *theiren.* From the beginning, their status seems to have been much the same as that of their Modern English descendants *hisn, hern, yourn,* and *theirn.* The personal pronouns ending in *-r* developed analogical genitive forms in *-es* rather late in Middle English: *hires, oures, youres,* and *heres* (Northern *theires*). These *-es* forms were used precisely like Modern English *hers, ours, yours,* and *theirs*—nominally, as in "The books on the table are hers (ours, yours, theirs)" and "Hers (ours, yours, theirs) are on the table."

DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUNS

Old English *se, þæt, sēo,* and plural *þā*, with their various oblique (non-nominative) forms, were ultimately reduced to *the, that,* and plural *thǭ.* However, inflected forms derived from the Old English declensions continued to be used in some dialects until the thirteenth century, though not in East Midland. *The,* which at first replaced only the masculine nominative *se,* came to be used as an invariable definite article. *That* and *thǭ* were thus left as demonstrative pronouns. A different *the,* from the Old English masculine and neuter instrumental *þē,* has had continuous adverbial use in English, as in "The sooner the better" and "He did not feel the worse for the experience."

Thǭ ultimately gave way to *thǭs* (ModE *those*), from Old English *þās,* though the form with *-s* did not begin to become common in the Midlands and the South until the late fifteenth century. Chaucer, for instance, uses only *thǭ* where we would use *those.* In the North we see that *thās,* the form corresponding to *thǭs* elsewhere, began to appear in writing more than a century earlier.

The other Old English demonstrative was *þes, þis, þēos.* By the thirteenth century, the singular nominative-accusative neuter *this* was used for all singular functions, and a new plural form, *thise* or *thēse,* with the ending *-e* as in the plural of adjectives, appeared.

These developments have resulted in Modern English *that–those* and *this–these*.

INTERROGATIVE AND RELATIVE PRONOUNS

The Old English masculine-feminine interrogative pronoun *hwā* became in Middle English *whō*, and the neuter form *hwæt* became *what*. Middle English *whō* had an objective form *whōm* from the Old English dative (*hwām, hwǣm*), which had replaced the accusative (OE *hwone*), as happened also with other pronouns. Old English *hwæt* had the same dative form as *hwā*, but, as with other neuters, it was given up, so the Middle English nominative and objective forms were both *what*. In Old English, the genitive of both *hwā* and *hwæt* had been *hwæs*; in Middle English this took by analogy the vowel of *whō* and *whōm*: thus *whōs*.

In Middle English *whō* was customarily used only as an interrogative pronoun or an indefinite relative meaning 'whoever,' as in "Who steals my purse steals trash," a usage that occurs first in the thirteenth century. The simple relative use of *who*, as in the title of Rudyard Kipling's story "The Man Who Would Be King," was not frequent until the sixteenth century, though there are occasional instances of it as early as the late thirteenth. The oblique forms *whōs* and *whōm*, however, were used as relatives with reference to either persons or things in late Middle English, at about the same time that another interrogative pronoun, *which* (OE *hwylc*), also began to be so used. Sometimes *which* was followed by *that*, as in Chaucer's "Criseyde, which that felt hire thus i-take," that is, 'Criseyde, who felt herself thus taken.'

The most frequently used relative pronoun in Middle English is indeclinable *that*. It is, of course, still so used, though modern literary style limits it to restrictive clauses: "The man that I saw was Jones" but "This man, who never did anyone any real harm, was nevertheless punished severely." A relative particle *þe*, continuing the Old English indeclinable relative-of-all-work, occurs in early Middle English side by side with *that* (or *þat*, as it would have been written early in the period).

COMPARATIVE AND SUPERLATIVE ADJECTIVES

In the general leveling of unstressed vowels to *e*, the Old English comparative ending *-ra* became *-re*, later *-er*, and the superlative suffixes *-ost* and *-est* fell together as *-est*. If the root vowel of an adjective was long, it was shortened before these endings—for example, *swēte, swetter, swettest*—though the analogy of the base form, as in the example cited, frequently caused the original length to be restored in the comparative and superlative forms; the doublets *latter* and *later* show, respectively, shortness and length of vowel.

As in Old English, *ēvel* (and its Middle English synonym *badde*, of uncertain origin), *gōd, muchel (mikel)*, and *lītel* had comparative and superlative forms unrelated to them etymologically: *werse, werst; bettre* or *better, best; mǭre, mǭst; lesse* or *lasse, lęste*. Some of the adjectives that had mutation in their Old English comparative and superlative forms retained the mutated vowel in Middle English—for instance, *long, lenger, lengest; ǭld, elder, eldest*.

VERBS

Verbs continued the Germanic distinction of strong and weak, as they still do. Although the vowels of endings were leveled, the gradation distinctions expressed in the root vowels of the strong verbs were fully preserved. The tendency to use exclusively one or the other of the preterit vowel grades (singular or plural) had begun, though there was little consistency: the vowel of the older plural might be used in the singular, or vice versa. The older distinction (as in *I sang, we sungen*) was more likely to be retained in the Midlands and the South than in the North.

The seven classes of strong verbs survived with the following regular gradations (although there were also many phonologically irregular ones). These gradation classes should be compared with those of the Old English forms (112–3):

	Infinitive	Preterit Singular	Preterit Plural	Past Participle
Class I	wrīten 'write'	wrǫt	writen	writen
Class II	clēven 'cleave'	clęf	cluven	clǫven
Class III	helpen 'help'	halp	hulpen	holpen
Class IV	bęran 'bear'	bar	bēren	bǫren
Class V	sprękan 'speak'	sprak	sprēken	sprēken
Class VI	shāken 'shake'	shōk	shōken	shāken
Class VII	hǫten 'be called'	hēt	hēten	hǫten

Although the seven strong verb patterns continued in Middle English, weak verbs far outnumbered strong ones. Consequently, the weak *-ed* ending for the preterit and past participle came to be used with many originally strong verbs. For a time some verbs could be conjugated either way, but ultimately the strong forms tended to disappear. A few verbs, however, continue both forms even today, such as *hang–hung–hanged* and *weave–wove–weaved*.

PERSONAL ENDINGS

As unstressed vowels fell together, some of the distinctions in personal endings disappeared, with a resulting simplification in verb conjugation. With *finden* 'to find' (strong) and *thanken* 'to thank' (weak) as models, the indicative forms were as follows in the Midland dialects:

Present
ich	finde	thanke
thou	findest	thankest
hē/shē	findeth, findes	thanketh, thankes
wē/yē/they	finde(n), findes	thanke(n), thankes

Preterit

ich	fǭnd	thanked(e)
thou	founde	thankedest
hē/shē	fǭnd	thanked(e)
wē/yē/they	founde(n)	thanked(e(n))

The verbs *been* 'to be' (OE *bēon*), *doon* 'to do' (OE *dōn*), *willen* 'to want, will' (OE *willan*), and *gǭǭn* 'to go' (OE *gān*) remained highly irregular in Middle English. Typical Midland indicative forms of *been* and *willen* follow:

Present

ich	am	wil(le), wol(le)[2]
thou	art, beest	wilt, wolt
hē/shē	is, beeth	wil(le), wol(le)
wē/yē/they	bee(n), beeth, sinden, ār(e)n[1]	wilen, wol(n)

[1] This Northern form is rare in ME.
[2] The forms with *o*, from the preterit, are late, but survive in *won't*, that is, *wol not*.

Preterit

ich	was	wolde
thou	wast, wēre	woldest
hē/shē	was	wolde
wē/yē/they	wēre(n)	wolde(n)

Developments of the following Middle English forms of the preterit present verbs are still in frequent use: *o(u)ghte* 'owed, was under obligation to'; *can* 'knows how to, is able,' *coude* (preterit of the preceding, ModE *could*, whose *l* is by analogy with *would*) 'knew how to, was able'; *shal* 'must,' *shulde* (preterit of the preceding); *mōst(e)* (ModE *must*) 'was able to, must'; *may* 'am able to, may,' *mighte* (preterit of the preceding); *dar* (ModE *dare*), and *durst* (preterit of the preceding).

PARTICIPLES

The ending of the present participle varied from dialect to dialect, with *-and(e)* in the North, *-ende* or *-ing(e)* in the Midlands, and *-inde* or *-ing(e)* in the South. The *-ing* ending, which has prevailed in Modern English, is from the old verbal noun ending *-ung*, as in Old English *leornung* 'learning' (i.e., knowledge), *bodung* 'preaching' (i.e., sermon), from *leornian* 'to learn' and *bodian* 'to announce, preach.'

Past participles might or might not have the prefix *i-* (*y-*), from Old English *ge-*. It was lost in many parts of England, including the East Midland, but frequently occurred in the speech of London as reflected in the writings of Chaucer.

WORD ORDER

Although all possible variations in the order of subject, verb, and complement occur in extant Middle English literature, as they do in Old English literature, much of that literature is verse, in which even today variations (inversions) of normal word order may occur. The prose of the Middle English period has much the same word order as Modern English prose. Sometimes a pronoun as object might precede the verb ("Yef þou me zayst, 'How me hit ssel lyerny?' ich hit wyle þe zigge an haste . . . ," i.e., word for word, 'If thou [to] me sayest, "How one it shall learn?" I it will [to] thee say in haste . . .').

In subordinate clauses, nouns used as objects might also precede verbs ("And we, þet . . . habbeþ Cristendom underfonge," i.e., 'And we, that . . . have Christian salvation received'). In the frequently occurring impersonal constructions of Middle English, the object regularly preceded the verb: *me mette* '(it) to me dreamed,' that is, 'I dreamed'; *me thoughte* '(it) to me seemed.' *If you please* is a survival of this construction (parallel to French *s'il vous plaît* and German *wenn es Ihnen gefällt*, i.e., 'if it please[s] you'), though the *you* is now taken as nominative. Other than these, there are very few inversions that would be inconceivable in Modern English.

MIDDLE ENGLISH ILLUSTRATED

The first passage is in the Northern dialect, from *The Form of Perfect Living*, by Richard Rolle of Hampole, a gentle mystic and an excellent prose writer, who died in 1349. Some parts of this passage may look strange to modern eyes, but we can fairly easily put it word for word into Modern English:

1. Twa lyves þar er þat christen men lyfes: ane es called actyve lyfe,
    Two lives there are that Christian men live: one is called active life,

    for it es mare bodili warke; another, contemplatyve lyfe, for it es in mare
    for it is more bodily work; another, contemplative life, for it is in more

    swetnes gastely.   Actife lyfe es mykel owteward and in mare travel,
    sweetness spiritually. Active life is much outward and in more travail,

    and in mare peryle for þe temptacions þat er in þe worlde.
    and in more peril for the temptations that are in the world.

    Contemplatyfe lyfe es mykel inwarde, and forþi   it es lastandar
    Contemplative life is much inward,   and therefore it is more lasting

    and sykerar,   restfuller,   delitabiler,   luflyer, and mare
    and more secure, more restful, more delightful, lovelier, and more

    medeful,   for it hase joy in goddes lufe and savowre in þe lyf
    full of reward, for it has joy in God's love and savor   in the life

    þat lastes ay   in þis present tyme if it be right   ledde. And þat
    that lasts forever in this present time if it be rightly led.   And that

felyng of joy in þe   lufe of Jhesu passes   al other merites in erth,
feeling of joy in the love of Jesus surpasses all other merits on Earth,

for it es swa harde to com to for þe freelte of oure flesch and þe many
for it is so   hard to come to for the frailty of our flesh and the many

temptacions þat we er   umsett   with þat lettes   us nyght and day. Al
temptations that we are set about with that hinder us night and day. All

other thynges er lyght at com to in regarde þarof, for þat may na man
other things are easy to come to in regard thereof, for that may no man

deserve, bot anely it es gifen of goddes godenes til þam þat verrayli
deserve, but only it is given of God's goodness to them that verily

gifes þam   to contemplacion and til quiete for cristes   luf.
give them(selves) to contemplation and to quiet   for Christ's love.

The next passage is from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written in the East Midland dialect in the last half of the fourteenth century by an unknown author, likely a Carthusian priest, and arguably the finest prose writer of that time:

2. God, unto Whom alle hertes ben open, and unto Whom alle wille
God, unto Whom all   hearts are   open, and unto Whom all wills

spekith and unto Whom no privé   thing is hid: I beseche Thee so
speak   and unto Whom no private thing is hidden: I beseech You so

for to clense the entent of myn hert   with the unspekable gift of Thi
for to cleanse the intent of my   heart with the unspeakable gift of Your

grace that I may parfiteliche love Thee, and worthilich preise Thee. Amen.
grace that I may perfectly   love You, and worthily praise You. Amen.

The following passages in late Middle English are from a translation of the Bible made by John Wycliffe or one of his followers in the 1380s. The opening verses of Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis are based on the edition by Conrad Lindberg; the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) is based on the edition by Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden. Punctuation has been modernized, and the letters thorn and yogh have been replaced, respectively, by *th* and *y*, *gh*, or *s*. These versions may be compared with the parallel passages in Chapters 5 and 8.

3.   Genesis 1.1–5.   1. In the first made God of nought heuen and erth.   2. The erth forsothe was veyn withinne and voyde, and derknesses weren vp on the face of the see. And the spirite of God was yborn vp on the waters.   3. And God seid, "Be made light," and made is light.   4. And God sees light that it was good and dyuidide light from derknesses.   5. And clepide light day and derknesses night, and maad is euen and moru, o day.

4.   Genesis 2.1–3.   1. Therfor parfit ben heuen and erthe, and alle the anour-nyng of hem.   2. And God fullfillide in the seuenth day his werk that he made, and he rystid the seuenth day from all his werk that he hadde

fulfyllide.   3. And he blisside to the seuenthe day, and he halowde it, for in it he hadde seesid fro all his werk that God schapide that he schulde make.

5.   Luke 15.11–17, 20–24.   11. A man hadde twei sones.   12. And the yonger of hem seide to the fadir, "Fadir, yiue me the porcioun of catel that fallith to me." And he departide to hem the catel. 13. And not aftir many daies, whanne alle thingis weren gederid togider, the yonger sone wente forth in pilgrymage in to a fer cuntre; and there he wastide hise goodis in lyuynge lecherously.   14. And aftir that he hadde endid alle thingis, a strong hungre was maad in that cuntre, and he bigan to haue nede.   15. And he wente, and drough hym to oon of the citeseyns of that cuntre. And he sente hym in to his toun, to fede swyn.   16. And he coueitide to fille his wombe of the coddis that the hoggis eeten, and no man yaf hym.   17. And he turnede ayen to hym silf, and seide, "Hou many hirid men in my fadir hous han plente of looues; and Y perische here thorough hungir! . . ."   20. And he roos vp, and cam to his fadir. And whanne he was yit afer, his fadir saigh hym, and was stirrid bi mercy. And he ran, and fel on his necke, and kisside hym.   21. And the sone saide to hym, "Fadir, Y haue synned in to heuene, and bifor thee; and now Y am not worthi to be clepid thi sone."   22. And the fadir seide to hise seruauntis, "Swithe brynge ye forth the firste stoole, and clothe ye hym, and yiue ye a ryng in his hoond, and schoon on hise feet.   23. And brynge ye a fat calf, and sle ye, and ete we, and make we feeste.   24. For this my sone was deed, and hath lyued ayen; he perischid, and is foundun."

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- 1590–
  VI to '
- 1600
  Asia, I