

Middle English Exercise 1: Modern English/Middle English comparison

Many of the differences between Middle English and Modern English are superficial. In our visual textual culture, however, we tend to find these small differences extraordinarily distracting. Focusing on the sounds of both languages rather than on their appearances—in particular, the spelling (that is, the orthography)—is a first step over what can seem like a huge chasm separating these two forms of English.

Later, we will develop a familiarity with the ways Middle English was pronounced by its native speakers (there was much variety among speakers of English then, just as there is now). Right now, for our purposes, it's best not to worry about the authenticity of our pronunciation but instead work to distance yourself from the visual appearance of the words on the page. If you're a visual learner, or a well-trained speller, you may find this takes some time.

On the next page is one of Chaucer's lyrics, one that conveniently introduces his poetic style and persona while providing useful material for our exercise. On the left, quite obviously, is the poem in Middle English. On the right is a Modern English translation of the poem.

Before you get started, fold the page in half vertically, and then turn it so that you see only the column on the left.

1. Read through the "Complaint to His Purse," in the Middle English, paying no attention to the Modern English for the time being. Don't even glance at it. Instead, simply try to read the Middle English the way you would read any other piece of (modern) literature. Read it through again, noting places where you feel most confused.
2. Now, read through it again, this time aloud, seeing if you can make any more sense of certain problem words by hearing them rather than only seeing them.
3. Next, reveal and read the Modern English translation. Clarify any areas of confusion you were left with by your first reading.
4. After you have a good understanding of the poem, go back through and circle the words that you can now see are "the same" in the two versions of the poem.
5. Now, look at those words that aren't circled, such as "wight" in line 1. What kinds of observations can you make, based on patterns you see?

Chaucer, "Complaint to His Purse"

To yow, my purs, and to non othir wyght
Complayne I, for ye ben my lady dere!
I am so sory, now that ye been lyght;
For certes, but yf ye make me hevychere,
Me were as leef be leyd upon my bere;
For which unto your mercy thus I crye,
Beth hevychere ayeyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now voucheth sauf this day, or hyt be nyght,
That I of yow the blisful soun may here,
Or se your colour lyk the sonne bryght,
That of yelownesse had never pere.
Ye be my lyf, ye be myne hertes stere,
Quene of comfort and of gode companye;
Beth hevychere ayeyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now purs, that ben to me my lyves lyght
And saveour, as down in this worlde here,
Out of this towne helpe me thurgh your myght,
Syn that ye wylle nat ben my tresorerer;
For I am shave as nye as any frere.
But yet I prey unto youre curtesye,
Beth hevychere ayeyn, or elles mot I dye!

Envoy de Chaucer

O conqueror of Brutes Albyoun,
Which that by lyne and fre eleccion
Ben verray kyng, this song to you I sende;
And ye, that mowen alle oure harmes amende,
Have mynde upon my supplicacioun.

To you, my purse, and to no other person
Complain I, for you are my lady dear!
I am so sorry, now that you are light;
For certain, unless you make me heavy cheer,
I were as happy to be laid upon my bier;
For which unto your mercy thus I cry:
Be heavy again, or else I may die!

Now vouch safe this day, ere be it night,
That I of you the blissful sound may hear,
Or see your color like the sun bright,
That of yellowness had never peer.
You are my life, you are my heart's steerer,
Queen of comfort and of good company:
Be heavy again, or else I may die!

You, purse, that be to me my life's light
And savior, as down in this world here,
Out of this town help me through your might,
Since that you will not be my treasurer;
For I am shaved as close as any friar.
But yet I pray unto your courtesy:
Be heavy again, or else I might die!

Envoy to Henry IV

O conqueror of Brutus' England,
Which that by line and free election
Are very king, this song to you I send;
And you, that may all our harms amend,
Have mind upon my supplication!