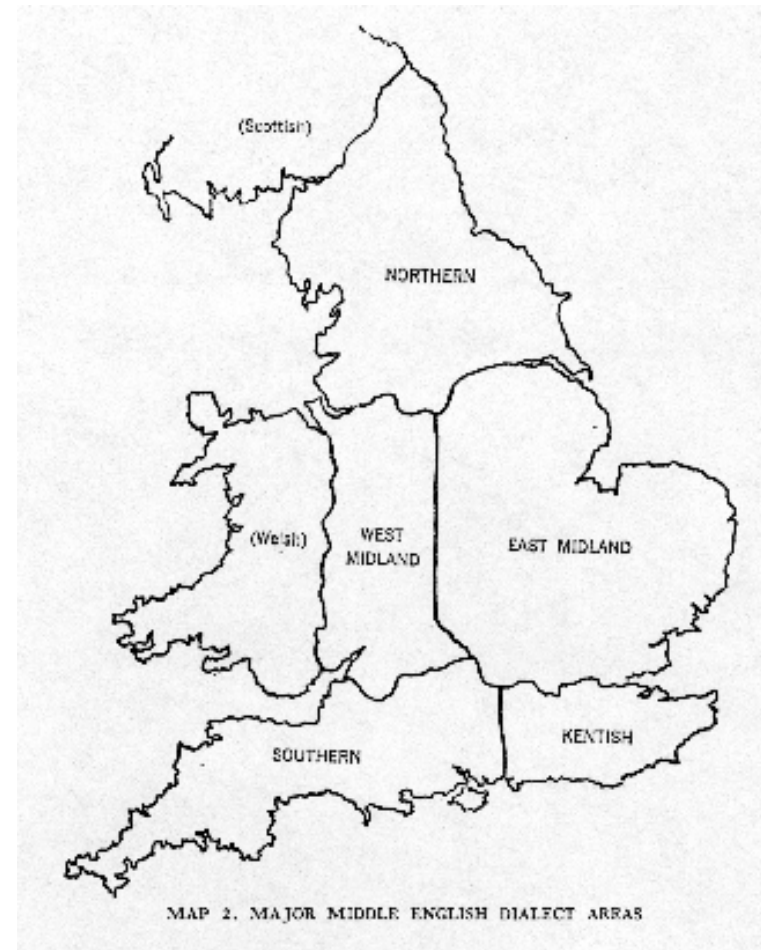


Middle English Exercise 3: Lexicon

The ME lexicon tends to provide far more problems to modern readers in the case of ME texts written in dialects other than the East Midland. (The East Midland dialect grew into Modern English.) A number of other dialects of Middle English existed, as indicated on this map. (The dialect referred to as Kentish in this map is also known as Southeastern.)

Northern ME, in particular, causes much more difficulty for modern readers, as does the West Midlands dialect. Largely, this is a matter of the lexicon of these dialects: East Midlands reflects a much greater influence of French loanwords; in the north, and to the west, the Germanic ties are more consistently available.



Map from <http://www.aug.edu/~nprinsky/Humn2001/me-dialects.GIF>

To better understand why a greater percentage of French loanwords would make Chaucer's ME easier for us to read, take a look at the following passage:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath *perced* to the roote,
And bathed euery *veyne* in swich *licour*
Of which *vertu engendred* is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in euery holt and heeth
The *tendre* croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halue *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* strondes.

When April with its sweet showers
Pierced the drought of March to the root,
And bathed every vein in such liquid
By the power of which the flower is born;
When Zephirus also with his sweet breath
Has inspired in every holt and heath
The tender crops, and the new sun
Has run his half-course in the Ram,
And little birds sing melodies,
Who sleep all night with one eye open
(The way nature inspires them to do in their hearts);
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek foreign lands.

As you probably know, these are the first lines of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The italicized words in the passage above come from French. You will note that in almost every case, the word (with a different spelling, perhaps) remains a word in Modern English. Most likely, these words struck you as "English," which of course they have become, although they were not originally. Chaucer's lexicon, like the lexicon of writers of his status and location (the late fourteenth century, toward the south of England), is full of French loanwords.

Elsewhere, as in the Welsh Marshes (in the West Midlands area) where William Langland produced *Piers Plowman*, a text contemporaneous to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, this was not the case. There is a much larger percentage of Germanic words in these dialects, as well as borrowings from Old Norse (brought over by Scandinavians in the Anglo-Saxon period).

Read the following passage from *Piers Plowman* (I've included a translation on the right, to help you make sense of what you're seeing) and note how much more difficult it is, from our perspective:

A raton of renoun, moost renable of tonge,
Seide for a soveryn help to hymselfe,
"I have yseyen segges" quod he, "in þe Cite of Londoun
Beren beizes ful briȝt abouten hire nekkes,
And somme colers of crafty werk; uncoupled þei wenten
Boþe in wareyne and in waast where himself liked
And ouþer while þei arn elliswhere, as I here telle.

A rat of renown, most ready of tongue,
Said as a sovereign salve for them all:
"I've seen creatures," he said, "in the city of London
Bear chains full bright about their necks,
And collars of fine craftsmanship; they come and go without leashes
Both in warren and in wasteland, wherever they please
And at other times they are in other places, as I hear tell.

The problems it poses are almost completely a matter of the lexicon of the poet's dialect.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, also from the late fourteenth century, is perhaps the most well-known challenge to modern readers –because it is the most frequently taught of ME poems, beyond Chaucer's – and again, it's largely a matter of the lexicon. Like *Piers Plowman*, it is an alliterative poem, which in both cases means that the poet must use a wide-ranging vocabulary, relying upon synonyms in order to sustain the alliteration. See the following passage:

Siþen þe sege and þe assaut wats sesed at Troye,
þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez,
þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt
Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe.
Hit watz Ennias þe athel and his highe kynde,
þat sitþen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicome
Welneze of al þe wele in þe west iles.

Since the siege and assault were ceased before Troy,
Which had broken and burned it to brand and to ash;
Since that rust-breaking traitor wrought treachery there,
And was tried for his treasons, his trickery deep;
Then the noble Aeneas and his knightly kin
Conquered far countries and crowned themselves kings
Of well-night all the West. Its wealth they made theirs.

Now go through both of these Middle English passages and look up some of the *familiar* words in the Oxford English Dictionary. (You may find the electronic version of the OED through the Library's databases page.) Choose at least three words from each, determine the origin of the word (French, Old English, Norse, etc.) and see what conclusions you might reach about the Middle English lexicon. Consider the implications about the lexicon of Modern English, too.

Next, look up some of the *unfamiliar* words (again, three in each passage). In order to find these words in the OED, you may need to get creative. The yogh will need to be replaced with a *g* or a *gh* in your search, and in some cases you will need to keep following links in order to get to the word that is appropriate, given orthographic variety. Again, see what conclusions you might reach about the Middle English and the Modern English lexicons.

[Note: The Modern English translation of the *Piers* passage comes from E. Talbot Donaldson's *Piers Plowman: An Alliterative Verse Translation*. Eds. Elizabeth D. Kirk and Judith H. Anderson. NY: W. W. Norton, 1990. 6. The Sir Gawain passage comes from *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*. Trans. and intro. Casey Finch. Berkeley: U CA P, 1993. 211.]