

Middle English

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Chapter 1

Corpus and Various documents distributed in class

The primary course book will be "an introduction to middle English".

Middle English (defined as the period between the Norman conquest and the introduction of the printing press) is handed down to us entirely in hand-written manuscript of which several copies tend to exist.

Hunter.uma.es

The Hengwrt is the oldest preserved manuscript of the Canterbury tales¹. The manuscript is written in *Gothic Cursiva Anglicana Formata*. This script is part of the Gothic family (the exclusive family after the Norman conquest). Of this family there are two types, one of which is *Anglicana*. The script is written cursively though adapted for literature (though separation of the letters) (indicated by the *Formata* in the script name).

Common in old manuscripts is the concept of biting, which is where the two letters share a side, such as in æ.

Modern elements of English absent from Middle English include the term "who" as a relative pronoun, being substituted instead by "that". Similarly, do-support for verbs has not yet come into being.

1.1 Lecture

Lecture slides supplied on-paper in class and available online

English arrives in Britain from the continent (Friesland, Germany, and Saxony) after the departure of the Romans. At this time, most people speak a Germanic language close to Welsh, pushing away the indigenous Celts who feel to the Scottish Isles, Cornwall and Ireland.

¹Known in old manuscripts as "The book of the tales of Canterbury"

As the viking raids start in Northumbria (793), there is more and more contact between the English west-Germanic language, and Scandinavian north-Germanic language. The vikings, other than raiding, likely settled peacefully coexisting with the Anglo Saxons. Given this extended coexistence, there is a great share of vocabulary which arises only in manuscripts of Middle English. Old English manuscripts survive primarily out of areas such as Wessex, which had little Scandinavian (Danish) influence. Towards the end of this period – right before the Norman conquest – a Norwegian sits on the throne, leaning – after his death – to a dispute between the Norwegians, English, and French.

After the Norman conquest, the official language of England became French with all government officials, aristocrats, and bishops being French nationals. This conquest affects English in many ways besides language, such as format, handwriting and poetry. After this period, when English returns as a written language, no one knows how to spell it, having written only French and Latin for 300 years, leading to great variation in spelling.

Chapter 2

Codicology and Paleography

Lecture slides supplied on-paper in class and available online

Middle English (and in fact, all medieval manuscripts) contain inherent ambiguity due to the difficulty of recognizing handwriting, with manuscripts containing otiose marks¹, having no normalized spacing or capitalisation, and frequent use of abbreviation.

A letter can be defined by its nomen, figura, and potestas, which together form the littera.

Term	Meaning
Littera	Letter
Nomen	Name
Figura	Shape
Potestas	Sound (literally “power”)

¹Serving no linguistic purpose

Chapter 3

Manuscript characteristics

Lecture slides supplied on-paper in class and available online

In comparison to Old English, Middle English lends itself much better to sociolinguistic analysis.

A major advantage for Middle English is the amount of texts that were preserved. In particular this allows us to separate Middle English characteristics from the idiosyncrasies from a particular scribe. This is aided particularly by the fact that we have the same manuscript copied by different scribes (such as 80 copies of the Canterbury tales), and different manuscripts by the same scribe (4 manuscripts in the case of Chaucer for instance).

A secondary element of Middle English which is entirely absent from Old English is the presence of plays and court transcripts, which allow for the reconstruction of actual spoken language, as opposed to mere poetic representation. A similar reconstruction can be formed from other works such as the Canterbury tales due to the presence of dialogues.

Neither the Old-, nor Middle- English, corpus has many authorial copies. This is likely because authors wrote on wax tablets, passing these on to scribes for copying, and subsequently meting down the wax for reusing.

Middle English also contains the first explicit statement of differences in dialect in comments, as well as attempts at recreating the forms of speech of different dialects. Of course, there is also dialectical difference among manuscripts themselves, which was present in writing likely as much as it was in speech.