

# Middle English

Wester, T.I.

Autumn 2023

# Contents

<b>1</b>		<b>2</b>
1.1	Lecture . . . . .	2
<b>2</b>	<b>Codicology and Paleography</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Manuscript characteristics</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Important Middle English Manuscripts</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Standardisation</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>6</b>		<b>9</b>

# 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 tales<sup>1</sup>. 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.

---

<sup>1</sup>Known 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 marks<sup>1</sup>, 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”)

---

<sup>1</sup>Serving 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.

## Chapter 4

# Important Middle English Manuscripts

Old English is mostly written in alliterative verse, as is common in Germanic languages, whereas middle English – influenced by French – has end-rime verse. In later Middle English however, there is a revival of alliterative rime. This revival is occasionally accompanied with intentionally archaic hand and spelling.

End-rime verse is popularized by secular scribes in London around 1400. Chaucer particularly popularizes verses with ten syllables and five stresses per line. Scribes with less French influence – such as those located in the Southwest Midlands, East Anglia and Yorkshire – stick more to the Old English traditions. Thus, many of the English texts written in these areas are in Alliterative meter, though there were also many written in French and Latin, occasionally within the same manuscript.

Interestingly, there are scribes from these areas, who write rather modern Latin, though they use many old English idiosyncrasies such as split ascenders, as well as the ð and .

In Anglo-Saxon times, the layout of a manuscript is not particularly important, though this becomes more important as the middle ages progress. Of course, for proper *ordinatio* – or page management – takes much more work and effort compared to the simpler-, business-inspired- manuscripts of Old English.

One example of *ordinatio* is Harley 2253 70<sup>v</sup>. In this two-column text, the religious texts start higher on the page than the secular texts. A further popular layout in Middle English is bob-and-wheel style printing. Where two

lines rime, with a third (located vertically between, horizontally on the next column) comments on both previous lines.



# Chapter 5

## Standardisation

Standardisation, or the reduction of the variations in spelling, grammar, and pronunciation, already happened in late west Anglo-Saxon before the Norman Conquest. After the Norman conquest, French took over administration, thereby robbing English of some of its functions and thereby setting back the project of standardisation. As English becomes more common in parliament, schools, and administration, English continues to standardise.

Throughout the history of Middle English, there are four streams converging towards standardisation.

Central Midlands	Religious, associated with Wycliffe and the Lollards
East 14th century London	Edinburgh and the national library of Scotland
Later 14th century London	Chaucer and national parliament (10%)
Post 1430	Westminster and national parliament

Standardisation generally goes through four stages: Acceptance, Selection, Codification, and Elaboration. The above, “standards” did not go through all stages, particularly codification and elaboration are missing. English does not go through all of these stages until the use of the printing press becomes widespread.

Another problem for the “standards” listed above, is that there is a limited number of scribes, genres, and texts for each standard. Among these standard there are some which are only written by one or two scribes, and only in end-rime verse poetry. Furthermore, there are manuscripts by multiple scribes, some of whom write in one of the standards above, whereas others do not, irrespective of communication between said scribes.

## Chapter 6

The Trinit Gower is a manuscript of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* copied by five scribes.

Scribe	Manuscripts
A	Not known for other manuscripts
B	Also copied Hengwrt and Ellesmere
C	Not known for other manuscripts
D	Also copied Corpus and Harley
E	Thomas Hoccleve

Scribe B may have been Chaucer's own scribe, while Thomas Hoccleve may have been Gower's own scribe. All of the scribes were present in London-Westminster around the same time and appear to have worked rather separately. Their copying is not particularly organized, leading to much of the variation we see.

While the area in which the scribes worked can rightly be called "London", the term "Westminster" might be more accurate and specific. Historically, London was seen as the center of literary texts, while Westminster was the center of documents. We now know that there is a lot of overlap between these groups. Such as is the case with Hoccleve, whose Westminster training is evident, though he neither worked nor lived at Westminster. Furthermore, he also copied literary (London-style) texts.