

# Middle English

Dr Alison Wiggins

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Drop in hour: Thursdays 3-4pm, Zoom joining link on Moodle



# Exploring Middle English and the *Miller's Tale*

## *Lecture topics:*

1. **Middle English + Chaucer's life**
2. Spelling and sounds + the portrait of Alisoun
3. Style and lexicon + the portraits of Nicholas and Absolon
4. Syntax and morphology + the fabliau plot and the trick
5. Narrative viewpoints + exam revision

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- Part I: Middle English vocabulary and Chaucer's lexicon
- Part II: Style and register
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- *conclusions, interrogations*
- *astromye, Nowelis flood*
- *fetisly, hende, love longing, lemman, gent, joly, derne*
- *Tee hee!*

# Middle English vocabulary

The core of Middle English vocabulary was inherited from Old English, but other words were introduced from French, Latin and Old Norse ('borrowings').



# Borrowings

- A new word is adopted which expresses a new concept, e.g. *skirt* (ON) and *shirt* (OE)
- A new word is adopted which overlaps with the meaning of existing words in the language, e.g. *commence* (OF), *begin* (OE)

## A rough guide to borrowings in Middle English:

- **Old Norse:** *egg, husband, knife, leg, neck, take, Thursday, ugly, want, window*, and the third person plural pronouns *they, their, them*
- **Latin:** *scripture, history, allegory, conviction, executor*
- **French:** *justice, prison, crime, court, mercy, pity, preach, clergy, paint, music, verse, robe, gown, mutton, beef*
- **Celtic:** *bard, clan, glen*
- **Middle Dutch:** *skipper, pump, tub*

# VOICE

*stevene* (OE, 4x)

or

*voys* (Fr, 28x)

The voys of peple touchede the hevene,  
So loude cride they with murie stevene,  
(*Knight's Tale*)

For trewely, ye have as myrie a stevene  
As any aungel hath that is in hevene  
(*Nun's Priest's Tale*)

Course: English Language x Middle English Dictionary x Corpus of Middle English x

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Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse

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Publication Info: Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1957  
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Group 1  
The Knight's Tale  
Sequitur pars secunda.

- ...It is ful fair a man to bere hym evene, / For al day meeteth men at unset **stevene**. / Ful litel woot arcite of his felawe, / That was so ny to herk / ...

Sequitur pars quarta.

- ...The voys of peple touchede the hevene, / So loude cride they with murie **stevene**, / God save swich a lord, that is so good, / He wilneth no destr / ...

The Cook's Tale

- ...rt / To hoppe and synge and maken swich disport; / And ther they setten **stevene** for to meete, / To pleyen at the dys in swich a streete. / For i / ...

Group 5  
The Squire's Tale  
Part I

- ... Ther is no fowel that fleeth under the hevene / That she ne shal wel understonde his **stevene**, / And knowe his menyng openly and pley, / And answeere hym in his / ...

Group 7  
The Nun's Priest's Tale

- ...d knew by kynde, and by noon oother loore, / That it was pryme, and crew with blisful **stevene**. / The sonne, he seyde, is clomben up on-evene / Fourty degrees / ...
- ... Was oonly for to herkne how that ye synge. / For trewely, ye have as myrie a **stevene** / As any aungel hath that is in hevene. / Therwith ye han in mus / ...

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online *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*

*misericorde* (French; mercy, pity, compassion)

Chaucer's *ABC* poem:

thou queen of misericorde

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (Book 3, lines 1177-78):

Of gilt misericorde!  
That is to seyn, that I forgeve al this

**RIP: 1960-2020?:**

*groovey*

*far out*

*wicked*

*dude*

*as if!*

*totes amaze*

*#onfleek*

## *Miller's Tale*

- *fetisly*
- *gent*
- *joly*
- *hende*

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register

## Chaucer's 'low style':

- a fast-paced narrative
- a predominance of short words
- simple syntax
- direct speech
- colloquialisms
- simple vocabulary
- homely imagery
- scatological words

But....note the exceptions in *The Miller's Tale*

register

*ers*

*fart*

*swyve*

*Nicholas swyves the carpenter's wife*



# GEOFFREY CHAUCER

I'm sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of how swyving awesome I am.

# *The Miller's Tale*

- **John** – *an old husband, a carpenter*
- **Alisoun** – *his young wife, a 'popelote' and a 'wenche'*
- **Nicholas** – *their student lodger, 'hende Nicholas'*
- **Absolon** – *the parish clerk, plays songs on his 'small rubible' and is squeemish ('squaymous')*
- *What does the selection and use of words associated with these characters indicate to us about them?*
- *What effects are achieved by Chaucer's particular choice of linguistic register in each case?*

Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,  
For youthe and elde is often at debaat  
[*Miller's Tale*, lines 121-2]

*Marry someone your own age, because old and young  
do not mix!*



### **Nicholas (lines 82-112):**

With hym ther was dwellynge a poure scoler,  
Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye  
Was turned for to lerne astrologye,  
And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns  
To demen by interrogaciouns  
If that men asked hym in certein houres  
Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles  
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Or if men asked hym what sholde bifalle  
Of evry thyng -- I may nat rekene hem alle.  
This clerk was cleped hende Nicholas;  
Of deerne love he koude and of solas,  
And therto he was sleigh and ful privee,  
And lyk a mayden meke for to see.  
A chambre hadde he in that hostelrye  
Allone, withouten any compaignye,  
Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote,  
And he hymself as sweete as is the roote  
Of lycorys or any cetewale.

His Almageste and bookes grete and  
smale,  
His astrelabie, longynge for his art,  
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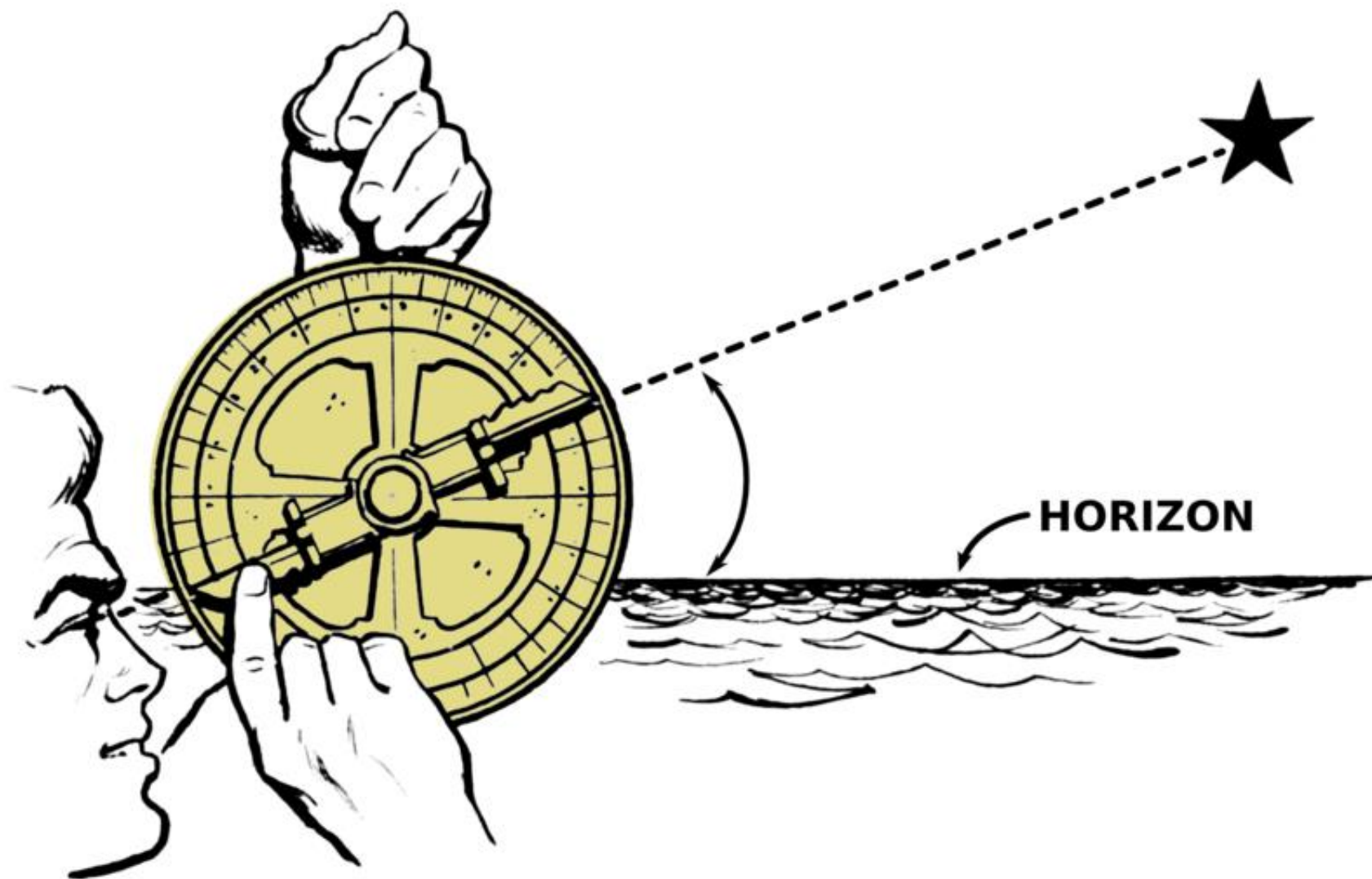
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## John' s malapropisms

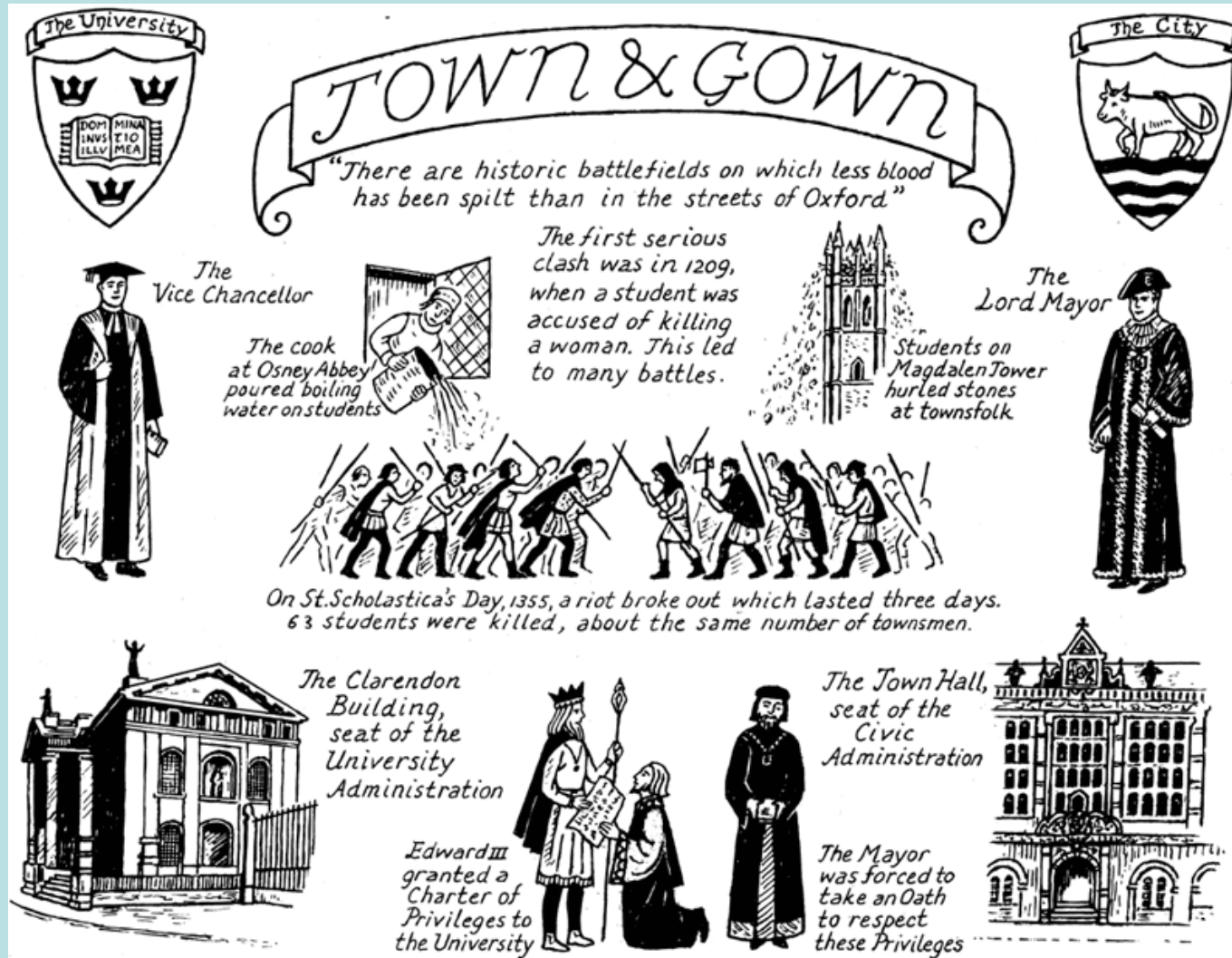
*Astromye* (for 'astronomy' ll. 3451, 3457)

*Nowelis flood* (for 'Noah's flood', l. 3818)

A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle,

But if he koude a carpenter bigyle [*The Millers Tale*, lines 191-92]

*A student had lazily wasted his time if he is not able to out-wit a carpenter!*



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‘hende Nicholas’

cf. Chaucer’s use of *noble*, *worthy*, *gentil*

Other meanings of hende:

- *skilled, crafty*
- *near at hand*

Alwey the nye slye / Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth

[lines 284-85, *Miller’s Tale*]

## **Absolon (lines 204-42:**

Now was ther of that chirche a pariss clerk,  
The which that was ycleped Absolon.  
Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,  
And strouted as a fanne large and brode;  
Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode.  
His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos.  
With Poules wyndow corven on his shoos,  
In hoses rede he wente fetisly.  
Yclad he was ful smal and proprely,  
Al in a kirtel of a lyght waget;  
Ful faire and thikke been the poyntes set.  
And therupon he hadde a gay surplys  
As whit as is the blosme upon the rys.  
A myrie child he was, so God me save.  
Wel koude he latn blood and clippe and shave,  
And maken a chartre of lond or acquitaunce.  
In twenty manere koude he trippe and daunce –

After the scole of Oxenforde tho –  
And with his legges casten to and fro,  
And pleyen songes on a smal rubible;  
Therto he song som tyme a loud quynynble,  
And as wel koude he pleye on a giterne.  
In al the toun nas brewhous ne tavernne  
That he ne visited with his solas,  
Ther any gaylard tappestere was.  
But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel  
squaymous  
Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous....  
...This pariss clerk, this joly Absolon,  
Hath in his herte swich a love-longynge  
That of no wyf took he noon offrynge;



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That of no wyf took he noon offrynge;

Now was ther of that chirche a parissch clerk,  
The which that was ycleped Absolon.

**Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,  
And strouted as a fanne large and brode;  
Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode.  
His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos.**

With Poules wyndow corven on his shoos,  
In hoses rede he wente fetisly.

Yclad he was ful smal and proprely,  
Al in a kirtel of a lyght waget;

Ful faire and thikke been the poyntes set.

And therupon he hadde a gay surplys

As whit as is the blosme upon the rys.

A myrie child he was, so God me save.

Wel koude he latn blood and clippe and shave,

And maken a chartre of lond or acquitaunce.

In twenty manere koude he trippe and daunce –

After the scole of Oxenforde tho –

And with his legges casten to and fro,

**And pleyen songes on a smal rubible;  
Therto he song som tyme a loud quynyble,  
And as wel koude he pleye on a giterne.**

In al the toun nas brewhous ne tavernne

That he ne visited with his solas,

Ther any gaylard tappestere was.

**But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel  
squaymous**

**Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous....**

...This parissch clerk, this joly Absolon,

Hath in his herte swich a love-longynge

That of no wyf took he noon offrynge;

‘To Alisoun now wol I tellen al  
My **love-longynge**’

‘What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamone?  
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!’

‘Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge,  
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.’

‘Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn **oore**!’

[*The Miller’s Tale*, from line 570]

## *Lemman / Lady*

‘To Alisoun now wol I tellen al  
My love-longynge’

‘What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamone?  
Awaketh, **lemman** myn, and speketh to me!’

‘Ywis, **lemman**, I have swich love-longynge,  
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.’

‘**Lemman**, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn oore!’

[*The Miller’s Tale*, from line 570]

## *Love-longynge*

‘To Alisoun now wol I tellen al  
My **love-longynge**’

‘What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamone?  
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!’

‘Ywis, lemman, I have swich **love-longynge**,  
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.’

‘Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn oore!’

[*The Miller’s Tale*, from line 570]

*oore / mercy, charitee, pitee*

‘To Alisoun now wol I tellen al  
My love-longynge’

‘What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamone?  
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!’

‘Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge,  
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.’

‘Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn **oore!**’

[*The Miller’s Tale*, from line 570]



- Learned terms associated with Nicholas: *conclusions, interrogations*
- Malapropisms used by John: *astromye, Nowelis flood*
- Outdated courtly terms used ironically about or by Absolon: *fetisly, hende, love longing, lemman, gent, joly, derne*
- Colloquialisms: *Tee hee!*

Absolon: ‘...That like a turtel trewe is my moornynge.  
I may nat ete na moore than a maide.’

Alison: ‘Go fro the wyndow, Jakke fool, she sayde’  
[*The Miller’s Tale*, from line 598]

Absolon: ‘...Lemman, they grace, and sweete bryd, thyn oore!’  
The wyndow she undoth and that in haste.

Alison: ‘Have do’, quod she, ‘com of, and speed the faste..’  
[*The Miller’s Tale*, from line 618]

# Lecture 3 – Revision

- What are 'borrowings'?
- Can you explain some of the reasons why Chaucer would chose French over English synonyms?
- What effects are achieved by Chaucer's particular choice of words to describe Nicholas, John and Absolon?
- What effects are achieved by Chaucer's particular choice of words spoken by Nicholas, John and Absolon?
- The word 'hende' is used in association with Nicholas 11 times in *The Miller's Tale*. Why does Chaucer repeat this word so often? What effects are achieved by its repeated use as we read the tale?
- What is scatological language? Where and how is it used in the *Miller's Tale*?
- How important is the 'town versus gown' theme in the *Miller's Tale*?
- What kind of language is Alison using when she calls Absolon 'Jakke fool' and tells him 'Have do'? What effect is achieved at these points?