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 + what next after Level 1 + exam revision

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Today

- Middle English grammar – an overview

- Address Terms in *The Miller᾽s Tale* – an introduction to pragmatics

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Middle English Grammar

Grammar = syntax + morphology

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

LEVEL 1

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

from *The Canterbury Tales*

2020-21

Edited, with interpretative notes and commentary, by Graham D. Caie

(revised, and with accompanying Middle English grammar, by Jeremy J. Smith)

'Chaucerian English represents a mid-point in the typological sequence OE : ME : PDE; it contains some forms and constructions which point back to OE usages, and others which point forward to later developments.' [Level 1 course booklet on Middle English, p. 42]

Word order

PDE

He loved God best *(SVO)*

She spoke French *(SVO)*

He was courteous *(SVC)*

ME

God loved he best *(Object-Verb-Subject)*

Frenssh she spak *(Object-Subject-Verb)*

Curteis he was *(Complement-Subject-Verb)*

_____

Example of Chaucer exploiting flexible word order in *The Miller's Tale* for the sake of rhyme:

This passeth forth al thilke Saterday

That Nicholas stille in his chambre lay, [SCV. . .]

NOT, as PDE: *Nicholas lay still in his chamber.* [SVC. . .]

Nouns

-*es* for possession and plurality

-*en* plurals

So: *eyen* 'eyes', *asshen* 'ashes', *been* 'bees', *shoon* 'shoes', *doughtren* 'daughters'
But also: *asshes, bees, shoes, doughtres*

Present tense indicative verb endings

	Middle English	**PDE**
Singular		
1st person (I)	call**e**	call
2nd person (thou)	call**est**	call
3rd person (he, she , it)	call**eth**	call**s**
Plural		
1st/2nd/3rd person (we/ye/they) call**e**(**n**)		call

Personal pronouns

Personal Pronouns

Singular	Nominative	Accusative/Dative	Genitive
1st person	I / ich / ik	me	my
2nd person	thou / thow	the(e)	thy
3rd preson	he, she, it	him, hir(e), it	his, hir(e), his

Plural	Nominative	Accusative/Dative	Genitive
1st person	we	us	oure
2nd person	ye	yow	youre
3rd preson	they	hem	hir(e)

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* The y-forms can be used for the singular to express politeness (compare to tu/vous usage in French)

Pragmatics

= *language in use*

'One aspect of Chaucer's work that is often praised by critics is his ability to represent speech, and it is sometimes claimed that Chaucer's works give us an insight into how people actually spoke in the Middle Ages. While it is possible to exaggerate the significance of this claim (after all, millers did not use learned vocabulary or speak in strict iambic pentameter), there is certainly an element of truth in it.'

[Simon Horobin, *Chaucer's Language*, p.150]

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Use of *thou* or *ye* in *The Miller῾s Tale*

The protagonists in *The Miller's Tale* generally use the more familiar *thou / the / thy* forms when speaking to each another.

However, there are a few instances of use of the more formal or polite *ye / yow / youre* forms, which are telling. For example:

Robyn addresses Nicholas at line 329:

"What! How! What do **ye**, **maister** Nicholay?"

Switching between *thou* and *ye* forms:

Absolon woos Alison using the polite yow *I ye I youre* in imitation of a courtly lover:

254 "I praye **yow** that **ye** wole rewe on me"

593-94 "Wel litel thynken **ye** upon me wo.

That for **youre** love I swete ther I go"

In anticipation of intimacy, Absolon switches to *thee I thou*, from line 612:

"Thanne make **thee** redy", quod she: "I come anon".

And unto Nicholas she seyde stille,

"Now hust and **thou** shalt laughen al thy fille."

This Absolon doun sette hym on his knees

And seyde, "I am a lord at alle degrees;

For after this I hope ther cometh moore.

Lemman, **thy** grace, and sweet bryd, **thyn** oore!"

The wyndow she undoth and that in haste.

"Have do", quod she, "com of, and speed the faste."

Switching between *thou* and *ye* forms:

Nicholas attempts to get close to Alison, from line 168:

And prively he caughte hire by the queynte

And seyde, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille,

For deerne love of **thee**, lemman, I spille."

Alison is in a flurry, replies back using the familiar form. She then regains her
    composure and attempts to keep Nicholas at a verbal and physical distance from
    line 175:

And with hir heed she wryed faste awey,

And seyde, "I wol nat kisse **thee**, by my fey!

Why, lat be," quod she, "lat be, Nicholas,

Or I wol crie 'out harrow' and 'allas!'

"Do wey **youre** handes, for **youre** curteisye!"

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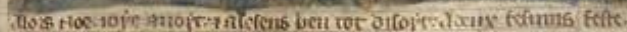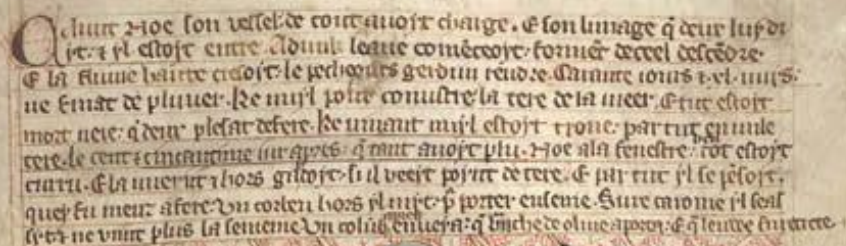- The plot and the 'trick'

The Miller's Tale

A fabliau

The Miller's Tale:
the plot and the trick

- 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 'smal rubible' and is squeemish ('squaymous')*

The plot and tricks:

1. The misdirected kiss / Absolon's punishment
2. The red-hot coulter / Nicholas's punishment
3. Noah's flood / John's punishment

Heile of Beersele, a Flemish 15th-century fabliau that contains many of the same features as Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*:

Heile arranges to let three men visit her at different times on one night. While she is in bed with the miller, the priest comes. She sends the miller to hide in a tub in the rafters. While she is in bed with the priest, the miller overhears the priest talking about the Flood. When the blacksmith comes and knocks at the door, begging at least to kiss her, she persuades the priest to stick his bottom out of the window. The blacksmith, having kissed it, returns with a hot iron and, in a repeat of the window-scene, burns the priest, whose cries for water cause the miller to cut himself loose and fall from the rafters. The moral is that injury and shame come to those who consort with whores.

Lecture 4 - Revision

- How would you characterise the relationship between Old, Middle and Present Day English grammar?

- Can you give some examples of the differences between Middle English and Present Day English syntax and morphology?

- In PDE the third person plural pronouns are 'they, their, them', but what was Chaucer's usage and where do the <th-> forms come from?

- Middle English has both <y-> and <th-> forms for the second person pronoun. Can you explain their different functions?

- As you re-read *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale*: pay attention to how the characters address each other and pick out every use of the second person pronoun in direct speech (including the Miller himself and the Host). Then, write a short summery to explain how Chaucer's precise use of terms of address contributes to the depiction and definition of the relationships between these fictional characters.

- Why might the linguistic field of pragmatics be especially relevant to analysis of the language of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*?

- Do you feel sorry for any of the men after they are punished, Absolon, Nicholas and/or Absolon? Can you justify you answer with reference to specific lines from the text?