University of Glasgow | School of Critical Studies

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

LEVEL 1

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

from *The Canterbury Tales*

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

Following this edition are **Interpretative Notes** on specific words and lines. More detailed explanations of literary and cultural points are given in the **Commentary** section that follows the Notes and you are alerted to these by the **[Commentary]** signs in the text.

THE GENERAL PROLOGUE to *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

'The Miller's Portrait', lines 545-68 of *The General Prologue*

The MILLERE was a stout carl for the nones.
Ful byg he was of brawn and eek of bones.
That proved wel, for over al ther he cam,
At wrastlynge he wolde have alwey the ram.
He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre;
Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre,
Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed.
His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
And therto brood, as though it were a spade.
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
A werte and theron stood a toft of herys,
Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys.
His nosethirles blake were and wyde.
A swerd and bokeler bar he by his syde.
His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys;
He was a janglere and a goliardeys --
And that was moost of synne and harlotries.
Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries;
And yet he hadde a thombe of golde, pardee.
A whit cote and a blew hood wered he.
A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne
And therwithal he broghte us out of towne.

THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE

Whan that the Knyght had thus his tale ytoold,
In al the route nas ther yong ne oold
That he ne seyde it was a noble storie
And worthy for to drawen to memorie--
And namely the gentils everichon.
Oure Hooste lough, and swoor, "So moot I gon,
This gooth aright; unbokeled is the male;
Lat se now who shal telle another tale,
For trewely the game is wel bigonne.
Now telleth ye, sir Monk, if that ye konne
Somwhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale." [Commentary]
The Millere that for dronken was al pale,

So that unnethe upon his hors he sat,
He nolde avalen neither hood ne hat,
Ne abyde no man for his curteisie,
But in Pilates voys he gan to crie, [Commentary]
And swoor, "By armes and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones,
With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale."
Oure Hooste saugh that he was dronke of ale,
And seyde, "Abyd, Robyn, my leeve brother,
Som bettre man shal telle us first another;
Abyd, and lat us werken thriftily."
"By Goddes soule," quod he, "that wol nat I,
For I wol speke, or elles go my wey."
Oure Hoost answerde, "Tel on, a devel wey!
Thou art a fool, thy wit is overcome!"
"Now herkneth," quod the Millere, "alle and some,
But first I make a protestacioun
That I am dronke, I knowe it by my soun;
And therfore, if that I mysspeke or seye,
Wyte it the ale of Southwerk, I you preye.
For I wol telle a legende and a lyf
Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf --
How that a clerk hath set the wryghtes cappe."
The Reve answerde and seyde, "Stynt thy clappe! [Commentary]
Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye;
It is a synne and eek a greet folye
To apeyren any man or hym defame,
And eek to bryngen wyves in swich fame.
Thou mayst ynogh of othere thynges seyn."
This dronke Millere spak ful soone ageyn,
And seyde, "Leve brother Osewold,
Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold,
But I sey nat therfore that thou art oon.
Ther been ful goode wyves many oon,
And evere a thousand goode ayeyns oon badde;
That knowestow wel thyself, but if thou madde.
Why artow angry with my tale now?
I have a wyf, pardee, as wel as thow,
Yet nolde I for the oxen in my plogh
Take upon me moore than ynogh,
As demen of myself that I were oon;
I wol bileve wel, that I am noon.
An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere." [Commentary]

What sholde I moore seyn, but this Millere
He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,
But tolde his cherles tale in his manere; [Commentary]
M'athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.
And therfore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but that I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.
And therfore whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef, and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee, and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys;
The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this,
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame,
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.

THE MILLER'S TALE

Heere bigynneth the Millere his Tale
Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford
A riche gnof that gestes heeld to bord,
And of his craft he was a carpenter.
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 shoures,
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,
His augrym stones, layen faire apart
On shelves couched at his beddes heed.
His presse ycovered with a faldyng reed,
And al above ther lay a gay sautrie,
On which he made a-nyghtes melodie
So swetely that all the chambre rong;
And Angelus ad virginem he song,
And after that he song the Kynges Noote.
Ful often blessed was his myrie throte;
And thus this sweete clerk his tyme spente
After his freendes fyndyng and his rente.
This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,
Which that he lovede moore than his lyf.
Of eighteteene yeer she was of age.
Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,
For she was wylde and yong, and he was old,
And demed hymself, been lik a cokewold.
He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,
That bad man sholde wedde his simylitude.
Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,
For youthe and elde is often at debaat;
But sith that he was fallen in the snare,
He moste endure, as oother folk, his care.
Fair was this yonge wyf, and therwithal
As any wezele hir body gent and smal. [Commentary]
A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk, [Commentary]
A barmclooth as whit as morne milk
Upon her lendes, ful of many a goore.
Whit was hir smok and broyden al bifoore
And eek bihynde, on hir coler aboute, [Commentary]
Of col-blak silk, withinne and eek withoute.
The tapes of hir white voluper
Were of the same suyte of hir coler;
Hir filet brood of silk, and set ful hye.
And sikerly she hadde a likerous ye. [Commentary]
Ful smale ypulled were hire browes two,
And tho were bent and blake as any sloo.
She was ful moore blisful on to see
Than is the newe pere-jonette tree,
And softer than the wolle is of a wether.
And by hir girdel heeng a purs of lether, [Commentary]
Tasseled with silk and perled with latoun.
In al this world, to seken up and doun,
There nys no man so wys that koude thenche
So gay a popelote or swich a wenche.

Ful brighter was the shynyng of hir hewe
Than in the Tour the noble yforged newe.
But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne
As any swalwe sittynge on a berne. [Commentary]
Therto she koude skippe and make game,
As any kyde or calf folwynge his dame.
Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,
Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth.
Wynsynge she was, as is a joly colt,
Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.
A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler,
As brood as is the boos of a bokeler.
Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye;
She was a prymerole, a piggesnye --
For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
Or yet for any good yeman to wedde!
Now, sire, and eft, sire, so bifel the cas,
That on a day this hende Nicholas
Fil with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye,
Whil that hir housbonde was at Oseneye --
As clerkes ben ful subtil and ful queynte --
And prively he caughte hire by the queynte [Commentary]
And seyde, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille."
And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones
And seyde, "Lemman, love me al atones,
Or I wol dyen, also God me save!"
And she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave,
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!"
This Nicholas gan mercy for to crye,
And spak so faire, and profred him so faste,
That she hir love hym graunted atte laste, [Commentary]
And swoor hir ooth, by Seint Thomas of Kent, [Commentary]
That she wol been at his comandement,
Whan that she may hir leyser wel espie.
"Myn housbonde is so ful of jalousie
That but ye wayte wel and been privee,
I woot right wel I nam but deed," quod she.
"Ye moste been ful deerne, as in this cas."
"Nay, therof care thee noght," quod Nicholas;
"A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle,
But if he koude a carpenter bigyle."

And thus they been accorded and ysworn
To wayte a tyme, as I have told biforn.
Whan Nicholas had doon thus everideel,
And thakked hire aboute the lendes weel,
He kiste hire sweete and taketh his sautrie,
And pleyeth faste and maketh melodie. [Commentary]
Thanne fil it thus, that to the paryssh chirche, [Commentary]
Cristes owene werkes for to wirche,
This goode wyf went on a haliday.
Hir forheed shoon as bright as any day,
So was it wasshen whan she leet hir werk.
Now was ther of that chirche a parissh clerk, [Commentary]
The which that was ycleped Absolon.
Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon, [Commentary]
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. [Commentary]
With Poules wyndow corven on his shoos,
In hoses rede he wente fetisly. [Commentary]
Yclad he was ful smal and proprely,
Al in a kirtel of a lyght waget;
Ful faire and thikke been the poyntes set. [Commentary]
And therupon he hadde a gay surplys [Commentary]
As whit as is the blosme upon the rys.
A myrie child he was, so God me save.
Wel koude he laten blood and clippe and shave,
And maken a chartre of lond or acquitaunce. [Commentary]
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 taverne
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 Absolon, that jolif was and gay, [Commentary]
Gooth with a sencer on the haliday,
Sensynge the wyves of the parisshe faste,
And many a lovely look on hem caste,
And namely on this carpenteris wyf.
To looke on hire hym thoughte a myrie lyf;
She was so propre and sweete and likerous.
I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous,

And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon.
This parissh clerk, this joly Absolon,
Hath in his herte swich a love-longynge
That of no wyf took he noon offrynge; [Commentary]
For curteisie, he seyde, he wolde noon.
The moone, whan it was nyght, ful brighte shoon,
And Absolon his gyterne hath ytake,
For paramours he thoghte for to wake.
And forth he gooth, jolif and amorous,
Til he cam to the carpenteres hous
A litel after cokkes hadde ycrowe,
And dressed hym up by a shot-wyndowe
That was upon the carpenteres wall.
He syngeth in his voys gentil and smal,
'Now, deere lady, if thy wille be,
I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me,' [Commentary]
Ful wel acordaunt to his gyternynge.
This carpenter awook, and herde him synge,
And spak unto his wyf, and seyde anon,
"What! Alison! Herestow nat Absolon, [Commentary]
That chaunteth thus under oure boures wal?"
And she answerde hir housbonde therwithal,
"Yis, God woot, John, I heere it every deel."
This passeth forth -- what wol ye bet than weel?
Fro day to day this joly Absolon
So woweth hire that hym is wo bigon.
He waketh al the nyght and al the day;
He kembeth his lokkes brode, and made hym gay;
He woweth hire by meenes and brocage,
And swoor he wolde been hir owene page; [Commentary]
He syngeth, brokkynge as a nyghtyngale;
He sente hire pyment, meeth, and spiced ale,
And wafres, pipyng hoot out of the gleede, [Commentary]
And, for she was of towne, he profred meede. [Commentary]
For som folk wol ben wonnen for richesse,
And somme for strokes, and somme for gentillesse.
Somtyme, to shewe his lightnesse and maistrye,
He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye. [Commentary]
But what availleth hym as in the cas?
She loveth so this hende Nicholas,
That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn;
He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn.
And thus she maketh Absolon hire ape,
And al his ernest turneth til a jape.
Ful sooth is this proverbe, it is no lye,
Men seyn right thus, "Alwey the nye slye

Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth."
For though that Absolon be wood or wrooth,
By cause that he fer was from hire sight,
This "nye" Nicholas stood in his light.
Now ber thee wel, thou hende Nicholas,
For Absolon may waille and synge 'allas.'
And so bifel it on a Saterday,
This carpenter was goon til Osenay;
And hende Nicholas and Alisoun
Acorded been to this conclusioun,
That Nicholas shal shapen hym a wyle
This sely jalous housbonde to bigyle.
And if so be the game wente aright,
She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght,
For this was his desir and hire also.
And right anon, withouten wordes mo,
This Nicholas no lenger wolde tarie,
But dooth ful softe unto his chambre carie
Bothe mete and drynke for a day or tweye,
And to hire housbonde bad hire for to seye,
If that he axed after Nicholas,
She sholde seye she nyste where he was,
Of al that day she saugh hym nat with ye;
She trowed that he was in maladye,
For, for no cry hir mayde koude hym calle,
He nolde answere for thyng that myghte falle.
This passeth forth al thilke Saterday,
That Nicholas stille in his chambre lay,
And eet and sleep or dide what hym leste,
Til Sonday, that the sonne gooth to reste.
This sely carpenter hath greet merveyle
Of Nicholas, or what thyng myghte hym eyle,
And seyde, "I am adrad, by Seint Thomas,
It stondeth nat aright with Nicholas.
God shilde that he deyde sodeynly!
This world is now ful tikel, sikerly.
I saugh today a cors yborn to chirche
That now on Monday last I saugh hym wyrche.
Go up," quod he unto his knave anoon,
"Clepe at his dore, or knokke with a stoon.
Looke how it is and tel me boldely."
This knave gooth hym up ful sturdily,
And at the chambre dore whil that he stood,
He cride and knokked as that he were wood,
"What! how! what do ye, maister Nicholay?
How may ye slepen al the longe day?"

But al for noghte, he herde nat a word.
An hole he foond, ful lowe upon a bord,
Ther as the cat was wont in for to crepe,
And at that hole he looked in ful depe,
And at the laste he hadde of hym a sight.
This Nicholas sat evere capyng upright,
As he had kiked on the newe moone.
Adoun he gooth, and tolde his mayster soone
In what array he saugh this ilke man.
This carpenter to blessen hym bigan
And seyde, "Help us, Seinte Frydeswyde!
A man woot litel what hym shal bityde.
This man is falle, with his astromye,
In som woodnesse or in som agonye;
I thoghte ay wel how that it sholde be!
Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee.
Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man
That noght but oonly his bileve kan.
So ferde another clerk with astromye;
He walked in the feeldes for to prye
Upon the sterres, what ther sholde bifalle,
Til he was in a marle-pit yfalle --
He saugh nat that. But yet, by Seint Thomas,
Me reweth soore of hende Nicholas.
He shal be rated of his studiyng,
If that I may, by Jhesus, hevene kyng. [Commentary]
Get me a staf, that I may underspore,
Whil that thou, Robyn, hevest up the dore.
He shal out of his studiyng, as I gesse",
And to the chambre dore he gan hym dresse.
His knave was a strong carl for the nones
And by the haspe he haaf it of atones;
Into the floor the dore fil anon.
This Nicholas sat ay as stille as stoon,
And evere caped upward into the eir.
This carpenter wende he were in despeir,
And hente hym by the sholdres myghtily
And shook him harde, and cride spitously,
"What! Nicholay! what, how! what, looke adoun!
Awak, and thenk on Cristes passioun! [Commentary]
I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes". [Commentary]
Therwith the nyght-spel seyde he anon-rightes
On foure halves of the hous aboute,
And on the tresshfold of the dore withoute.
"Jhesu Crist and Seinte Benedight,
Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,

For nyghtes verye, the white pater-noster!
Where wentestow, Seinte Petres soster?" [Commentary]
And atte laste this hende Nicholas
Gan for to sike soore, and seyde, "Allas!
Shal al the world be lost eftsoones now?" [Commentary]
This carpenter answerde, "What seystow?
What! Thynk on God, as we doon, men that swynke."
This Nicholas answerde, "Fecche me drynke,
And after wol I speke in pryvetee
Of certeyn thyng that toucheth me and thee.
I wol telle it noon oother man, certeyn."
This carpenter gooth doun, and comth ageyn,
And broghte of myghty ale a large quart.
And whan that ech of hem had dronke his part,
This Nicholas his dore faste shette,
And doun the carpenter by hym he sette.
He seyde, "John, myn hooste, lief and deere,
Thou shalt upon thy trouthe swere me heere
That to no wight thou shalt this conseil wreye,
For it is Cristes conseil that I seye;
And if thou telle it man, thou art forlore.
For this vengeaunce thou shalt han therfore,
That if thou wreye me, thou shalt be wood." [Commentary]
"Nay, Crist forbede it, for his hooly blood!"
Quod tho this sely man, "I nam no labbe;
Ne, though I seye, I nam nat lief to gabbe.
Sey what thou wolt, I shal it nevere telle
To child ne wyf, by hym that harwed helle!"
"Now John," quod Nicholas, "I wol nat lye;
I have yfounde in myn astrologye, [Commentary]
As I have looked in the moone bright, [Commentary]
That now a Monday next, at quarter nyght, [Commentary]
Shal falle a reyn, and that so wilde and wood,
That half so greet was nevere Noes flood.
This world," he seyde, "in lasse than an hour
Shal al be dreynt, so hidous is the shour.
Thus shal mankynde drenche, and lese hir lyf."
This carpenter answerde, "Allas, my wyf!
And shal she drenche? allas, myn Alisoun!"
For sorwe of this he fil almoost adoun,
And seyde, "Is ther no remedie in this cas?"
"Why, yis, for Gode," quod hende Nicholas,
"If thou wolt werken after loore and reed.
Thou mayst nat werken after thyn owene heed,
For thus seith Salomon, that was ful trewe, [Commentary]
'Werk al by conseil and thou shalt not rewe.'

And, if thou werken wolt by good conseil,
I undertake, withouten mast and seyl, [Commentary]
Yet shal I saven hire and thee and me.
Hastow nat herd hou saved was Noe,
Whan that oure Lord hadde warned hym biforn
That al the world with water sholde be lorn?"
"Yis," quod this carpenter, "ful yoore ago."
"Hastou nat herd," quod Nicholas, "also
The sorwe of Noe with his felaweshipe,
Er that he myghte gete his wyf to shipe? [Commentary]
Hym hadde be levere, I dar wel undertake
At thilke tyme, than alle wetheres blake,
That she hadde had a ship hirself allone.
And therfore, woostou what is best to doone?
This asketh haste, and of an hastif thyng [Commentary]
Men may nat preche or maken tariyng.
Anon go gete us faste into this in
A knedyng-trogh or ellis a kymelyn
For ech of us, but looke that they be large,
In which we mowe swymme as in a barge,
And han therinne vitaille suffisant
But for a day: fy on the remenant! [Commentary]
The water shal aslake and goon away
Aboute pryme upon the nexte day.
But Robyn may nat wite of this, thy knave,
Ne eek thy mayde Gille I may nat save.
Axe nat why, for though thou aske me,
I wol nat tellen Goddes pryvetee. [Commentary]
Suffiseth thee, but if thy wittes madde,
To han as greet a grace as Noe hadde. [Commentary]
Thy wyf shal I wel saven, out of doute.
Go now thy wey, and speed thee heer-aboute.
"But whan thou hast, for hire and thee and me,
Ygeten us thise knedyng tubbes thre, [Commentary]
Thanne shaltow hange hem in the roof ful hye,
That no man of oure purveiaunce spye.
And whan thou thus hast doon, as I have seyd,
And hast oure vitaille faire in hem yleyd,
And eek an ax, to smyte the corde atwo, [Commentary]
Whan that the water comth, that we may go,
And breke an hole an heigh, upon the gable,
Unto the gardyn-ward, over the stable,
That we may frely passen forth oure way,
Whan that the grete shour is goon away,
Thanne shaltou swymme as myrie, I undertake,
As dooth the white doke after hire drake. [Commentary]

Thanne wol I clepe, 'How, Alison! how, John!
Be myrie for the flood wol passe anon.'
And thou wolt seyn, 'Hayl, maister Nicholay!
Good morwe, I se thee wel, for it is day.'
And thanne shul we be lordes al oure lyf [Commentary]
Of al the world, as Noe and his wyf.
But of o thyng I warne thee ful right;
Be wel avysed on that ilke nyght
That we ben entred into shippes bord,
That noon of us ne speke nat a word,
Ne clepe, ne crie, but be in his preyere;
For it is Goddes owene heeste deere. [Commentary]
Thy wyf and thou moote hange fer atwynne, [Commentary]
For that bitwixe yow shal be no synne,
Namoore in lookyng than ther shal in deede;
This ordinance is seyd. Go, God thee speede!
Tomorwe at nyght, whan men ben alle aslepe,
Into oure knedyng-tubbes wol we crepe,
And sitten there, abidyng Goddes grace.
Go now thy wey, I have no lenger space
To make of this no lenger sermonyng.
Men seyn thus, 'sende the wise, and sey no thyng'. [Commentary]
Thou art so wys it needeth thee nat teche.
Go, save oure lyf, and that I the biseche."
This sely carpenter goth forth his wey;
Ful ofte he seide 'allas' and 'weylawey,'
And to his wyf he tolde his pryvetee,
And she was war, and knew it bet than he,
What al this queynte cast was for to seye.
But natheless she ferde as she wolde deye,
And seyde, "Allas! go forth thy wey anon,
Help us to scape or we been dede echon!
I am thy trewe, verray wedded wyf.
Go, deere spouse, and help to save oure lyf." [Commentary]
Lo, which a greet thyng is affeccioun!
Men may dyen of ymaginacioun,
So depe may impressioun be take. [Commentary]
This sely carpenter bigynneth quake;
Hym thynketh verraily that he may see
Noees flood come walwynge as the see
To drenchen Alisoun, his hony deere.
He wepeth, weyleth, maketh sory cheere;
He siketh with ful many a sory swogh;
He gooth and geteth hym a knedyng-trogh, [Commentary]
And after that a tubbe and a kymelyn,
And pryvely he sente hem to his in,

And heng hem in the roof in pryvetee.
His owene hand he made laddres thre
To clymben by the ronges and the stalkes
Unto the tubbes hangynge in the balkes,
And hem vitailled, bothe trogh and tubbe,
With breed and chese, and good ale in a jubbe,
Suffisynge right ynogh as for a day.
But, er that he hadde maad al this array,
He sente his knave, and eek his wenche also,
Upon his nede to London for to go.
And on the Monday, whan it drow to nyght,
He shette his dore withoute candel-lyght,
And dressed alle thyng as it sholde be.
And shortly up they clomben alle thre.
They seten stille wel a furlong way.
"Now, Pater-noster, clom!" seyde Nicholay,
And "Clom," quod John, and "clom," seyde Alisoun.
This carpenter seyde his devocioun,
And stille he sit, and biddeth his preyere,
Awaitynge on the reyn, if he it heere.
The dede sleep, for wery bisynesse,
Fil on this carpenter right, as I gesse,
Aboute corfew-tyme, or litel moore.
For travaille of his goost he groneth soore
And eft he routeth -- for his heed myslay.
Doun of the laddre stalketh Nicholay,
And Alisoun ful softe adoun she spedde.
Withouten wordes mo they goon to bedde,
Ther as the carpenter is wont to lye.
Ther was the revel and the melodye!
And thus lith Alisoun and Nicholas,
In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,
Til that the belle of laudes gan to rynge, [Commentary]
And freres in the chauncel gonne synge.
This parissh clerk, this amorous Absolon,
That is for love alwey so wo bigon,
Upon the Monday was at Oseneye
With compaignye, hym to disporte and pleye,
And axed upon cas a cloisterer
Ful prively after John the carpenter;
And he drough hym apart out of the chirche,
And seyde, "I noot, I saugh hym heere nat wirche
Syn Saterday. I trowe that he be went
For tymber, ther oure abott hath hym sent,
For he is wont for tymber for to go,
And dwellen at the grange a day or two;

Or elles he is at his hous, certeyn.
Where that he be, I kan nat soothly seyn."
This Absolon ful joly was and light,

And thoghte, "Now is tyme to wake al nyght,
For sikirly I saugh hym nat stirynge
Aboute his dore, syn day bigan to sprynge.
So moot I thryve, I shal, at cokkes crowe,
Ful pryvely knokken at his wyndowe
That stant ful lowe upon his boures wal. [Commentary]
To Alisoun now wol I tellen al
My love-longynge, for yet I shal nat mysse
That at the leeste wey I shal hire kisse. [Commentary]
Som maner confort shal I have, parfay.
My mouth hath icched al this longe day --
That is a signe of kissyng atte leeste.
Al nyght me mette eek I was at a feeste.
Therfore I wol go slepe an houre or tweye,
And al the nyght thanne wol I wake and pleye."
Whan that the firste cok hathe crowe, anon
Up rist this joly lovere Absolon,
And hym arrayeth gay, at poynt-devys.
But first he cheweth greyn and lycorys
To smellen sweete, er he hadde kembd his heer.
Under his tonge a trewe-love he beer,
For therby wende he to ben gracious.
He rometh to the carpenteres hous,
And stille he stant under the shot-wyndowe;
Unto his brest it raughte, it was so lowe,
And softe he cougheth with a semy soun:
"What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!
Wel litel thynken ye upon me wo,
That for youre love I swete ther I go. [Commentary]
No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;
I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.
Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge,
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.
I may nat ete na moore than a maide." [Commentary]
"Go fro the wyndow, Jakke fool, she sayde;
As help me God, it wol nat be 'com pa me'. [Commentary]
I love another, and elles I were to blame,
Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon.
Go forth thy wey or I wol caste a ston,
And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!"

"Allas", quod Absolon, "and weylawey,
That trewe love was evere so yvel biset!
Thanne kysse me, syn it may be no bet,
For Jhesus love and for the love of me."
"Wiltow thanne go thy wey therwith?" quod she.
"Ye, certes, lemman", quod this Absolon.
"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 sweete bryd, thyn oore!" [Commentary]
The wyndow she undoth and that in haste.
"Have do", quod she, "com of, and speed the faste,
Lest that oure neighebores thee espie"
This Absolon gan wype his mouth ful drie.
Derk was the nyght as pich or as the cole,
And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole;
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
Ful savourly, er he were war of this.
Abak he stirte and thoughte it was amys --
For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.
He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd,
And seyde, "Fy! allas! what have I do?"
"Tehee!" quod she and clapte the wyndow to;
And Absolon gooth forth a sory pas.
"A berd! a berd!" quod hende Nicholas, [Commentary]
"By goddes corpus, this goth faire and weel".
This sely Absolon herde every deel,
And on his lippe he gan for anger byte,
And to hymself he seyde, "I shal thee quyte". [Commentary]
Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes
With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes,
But Absolon, that seith ful ofte, "Allas!
My soule bitake I unto Sathanas,
But me were levere than al this toun," quod he,
"Of this despit awroken for to be.
Allas," quod he, "allas, I ne hadde ybleynt."
His hoote love was coold and al yqueynt,
For fro that tyme that he hadde kist hir ers,
Of paramours he sette nat a kers;
For he was heeled of his maladie.
Ful ofte paramours he gan deffie,
And weep as dooth a child that is ybete.

A softe paas he wente over the strete
Until a smyth men cleped daun Gerveys,
That in his forge smythed plough harneys.
He sharpeth shaar and kultour bisily.
This Absolon knokketh al esily
And seyde, "Undo, Gerveys, and that anon."
"What, who artow?" "It am I, Absolon."
"What, Absolon! for Cristes sweete tree,
Why rise ye so rathe? ey, benedicitee!
What eyleth yow? Som gay gerl, God it woot,
Hath broght yow thus upon the viritoot.
By Seinte Note, ye woot wel what I mene."
This Absolon ne roghte nat a bene
Of al his pley; no word agayn he yaf.
He hadde moore tow on his distaf
Than Gerveys knew, and seyde, "Freend so deere,
That hoote kultour in the chymenee heere
As lene it me, I have therwith to doone,
And I wol brynge it thee agayn ful soone."
Gerveys answerde, "Certes, were it gold
Or in a poke, nobles alle untold,
Thou sholdest have, as I am trewe smyth.
Ey, Cristes foo, what wol ye do therwith?"
"Therof", quod Absolon, "be as be may.
I shal wel telle it thee to-morwe day,"
And caughte the kultour by the colde stele.
Ful softe out at the dore he gan to stele,
And wente unto the carpenteris wal.
He cogheth first, and knokketh therwithal
Upon the wyndowe, right as he dide er.
This Alisoun answerde, "Who is ther
That knokketh so? I warante it a theef."
"Why, nay", quod he, "God woot, my sweete leef,
I am thyn Absolon, my deerelyng.
Of gold", quod he, "I have thee broght a ryng.
My mooder yaf it me, so God me save.
Ful fyn it is and therto wel ygrave.
This wol I yeve thee, if thou me kisse.
This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape.
He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape;
And up the wyndowe dide he hastily,
And out his ers he putteth pryvely
Over the buttok, to the haunche-bon.
And therwith spak this clerk, this Absolon,
"Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art."

This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart,
As greet as it had been a thonder dent,
That with the strook he was almoost yblent.
And he was redy with his yren hoot,
And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot.
Of gooth the skyn an hande-brede aboute --
The hoote kultour brende so his toute --
And for the smert he wende for to dye.
As he were wood, for wo he gan to crye, [Commentary]
"Help! water! water! help, for goddes herte!"
This carpenter out of his slomber sterte,
And herde oon crien "Water" as he were wood,
And thoughte, allas, now comth Nowelis Flood! [Commentary]
He sit hym up withouten wordes mo,
And with his ax he smoot the corde atwo,
And doun gooth al -- he foond neither to selle,
Ne breed ne ale, til he cam to the celle
Upon the floor, and ther aswowne he lay.
Up stirte hire Alisoun and Nicholay,
And criden "out" and "harrow" in the strete. [Commentary]
The neighebores, both smale and grete,
In ronnen for to gauren on this man,
That yet aswowne lay, bothe pale and wan,
For with the fal he brosten hadde his arm.
But stonde he moste unto his owene harm,
For whan he spak, he was anon bore doun
With hende Nicholas and Alisoun.
They tolden every man that he was wood,
He was agast so of Nowelis Flood
Thurgh fantasie, that of his vanytee
He hadde yboght hym knedyng tubbes thre,
And hadde hem hanged in the roof above;
And that he preyed hem, for Goddes love,
To sitten in the roof, par compaignye.
The folk gan laughen at his fantasye.
Into the roof they kiken and they cape,
And turned al his harm unto a jape.
For what so that this carpenter answerde,
It was for noght -- no man his reson herde.
With othes grete he was so sworn adoun,
That he was holde wood in al the toun;
For every clerk anonright heeld with oother.
They seyde, "The man is wood, my leeve brother."
And every wight gan laughen at this stryf.
Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al his kepyng and his jalousye;

And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;
745 And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!
Heere endeth the Millere his tale

Interpretative notes

[The Portrait of the Miller, from the General Prologue]
545 **carl** 'fellow'
548 **have alwey the ram** 'win the prize'
549 **a thikke knarre** 'a sturdy lad'; lit. 'a strong knot of wood'.
550 **nolde** < ne+wolde,'would not'; **harre** 'hinge'; his greatest achievement appears to be knocking down doors with his head.
554 **cop** 'ridge'. His physical ugliness is generally a sign of inner corruption in medieval literature, and his red hair a sign of bad temper.
559 **forneys** 'furnace'; the gates of hell in medieval drama were often represented as a gaping furnace.
560 **janglere** 'gossip'; **goliardeys'** a teller of coarse stories'; originally a vagabond priest in 12th-13th centuries who travelled around telling 'goliardic', i.e. crude, satirical poems,
562 **koude** 'knew how to.'
563 **thombe of gold**. There is a proverb, 'an honest miller has a thumb of gold' = there is no such thing; it is possibly meant ironically that the Miller's heavy thumb pressed down on the flour when he weighed it.

[Miller's Prologue and Tale]
2 **nas = ne+was**, 'wasn't'
4 **for to drawen to memorie** 'to bear in mind', 'to remember'.
5 **gentils** 'nobles', cf. PDE 'gentlemen'
6 **So moot I gon;** an exclamation: 'Well I never'; lit. 'So may I go'.
7 **unbokeled is the male** lit. 'the trunk/bag is unbuckled'; i.e. the event has begun.
8 **Lat se** 'Let us see'.
10 **Ye** 'You'; this is the polite/plural form used by the Host, Harry Bailey, to his superior, the Monk. Harry addresses the Miller in the singular, familiar form 'thou'; cf. line 27.
11 **quite with** 'repay'.
13 **unnethe** 'hardly', 'with difficulty'.
14 **nolde avalen** < ne+wolde 'would not take off'. A sign of disrespect.
18 **kan** 'know'.
19 **quite**; knowing the Miller**, quite** here may have an ironic sense of 'to avenge'. His tale does parody the courtly tradition of the Knight's Tale.
21 **leeve** 'dear'.
23 **werken thriftily** 'proceed properly'.
26 **a devel wey!** 'damn you!'
28 **alle and some** 'one and all'
30 **soun** 'sound' (of my voice).
32 **Wyte it the ale** 'blame the ale'.
33 **lyf** 'a saint's life', 'hagiography'

35 **hath set the wryghtes cappe** 'made a fool of the carpenter'.
36 **Stynt thy clappe**! 'Shut up!'.
37 **lewed;** in ME **lewd** can simply mean 'unlearned', 'not clerical', but it came to mean 'vulgar', 'rude'.
37 **harlotrye** 'vulgar or obscene talk or actions'. A harlot was a low person of either gender.
39 **apeyren** 'injure'
41 This line means 'You can talk as much as you want about any other matter'.
42 **soone** 'immediately'
43 **Leve** 'dear'
47 **ayeyns oon badde** 'for every bad [wife]'
48 **knowestow** = 'knowest thou'; 48 **but if thou madde** 'unless you're mad'
49 **artow** = 'art thou', 'are you'
52 This line means '[I would not] assume too much'.
53 This line means 'to consider myself one [i.e. a cuckold]
56 **pryvetee** 'secrets'
57 **foyson** 'abundance'.
62 **M'athynketh** 'it grieves me', 'I greatly regret'
63 **gentil** wight 'noble person'
65 **reherce** 'repeat'
66 **hir** : 'their'; Chaucer uses the following forms for the 3rd pers. plural pronouns: **they** (nom.), **hir** (possess.), **hem** (accus. and dat.)
68 **list it nat yheere** ' does not wish to hear it'.
70 **grete and smale** 'important and trivial [tales]'
71 **storial** 'historical'
72 **gentillesse** 'nobility'
75 **othere mo** ' others' (lit. 'other more')
77 **Avyseth yow** 'be advised'.
78 This line means 'And also men should not take a joke too seriously'.
79 **Whilom** 'Once apon a time'
80 This line means: 'A rich churl who took in lodgers', where **gnof** means 'churl', 'boor'.
83 **art**; The trivium or liberal arts; the three basic subjects at university -- grammar, logic and rhetoric. Today the humanities degree is still called 'Arts'; **fantasye** 'mind', 'imagination'.
84 **astrologye** This was a distinguished subject, still connected to astronomy. Chaucer was skilled in astrology and wrote *The Astrolabe*.
85-6 These lines mean 'And knew a certain [number of] experiments to determine by enquiry'.
87 **in certein houres** 'at what specific time'; the prediction of the time of floods is going to play a crucial part in the plot.
89-90 'Or if people asked him what might occur in any eventuality'**;** **rekene** means 'tell'.
91 **cleped** 'called'; **hende**: an ambiguous word: 'noble', 'courteous', 'obliging' and possibly 'handy','near at hand'; it becomes the epithet consistently used for Nicholas.
92 **deerne** 'secret', **solas** 'delight', 'pleasure': both terms are part of the vocabulary of courtly love.
93 **sleigh** 'subtle'; **ful privee** 'extremely secret/withdrawn'
94 **meke for to see** 'appeared modest'
97 **fetisly ydight** 'attractively dressed/decorated'; **swoote** 'sweet'.
99 **lycorys** 'liquorice', **cetewale** 'ginger': both these herbs were considered aphrodisiacs.

100 **Almageste** a major treatise on astronomy by the Greek astronomer Ptolemy (c. 100-170); the term later came to be used to refer to any major astronomical text.
101 **astrelabie** 'astrolobe'; an astronomical instrument, used for measuring the position of stars and planets; an expensive instrument, so, along with his many manuscripts (line 100), he could not be so poor (line 82); **longynge for his art** 'belonging to his science/studies'.
102 **augrym stones**; stones or counters with arabic numerals for use on an abacus
104 **faldyng reed** 'a red cloth'
105 **sautrie** 'a psaltery'; a musical intrument like a small triangular harp, plucked by quills'. A courtly instrument, as opposed to the Miller's bagpipes.
109 **The Kynges Noot**e 'The King's Song'; This song has not been identified.
110 This line is probably ironic; 'blessed' could either mean that he is blessed by a good voice or that after he sings his throat is blessed by a drink.
112 This line means 'Depending on the financial generosity of his friends and his own income'.
115 **eighteteene**. This was by no means an early age for marriage during the medieval period.
116 **narwe in cage** 'closely [confined] in a cage'; line 123 suggests that John also is caught in a trap. The closely guarded wife is a common character in fabliaux.
117 **old:** the fabliau husband is traditionally old
118 This line means 'he considered himself likely to be a cuckold/sexually cheated'.
121 **after hire estaat** 'according to their condition (social, age, etc.)
123 **sith;** the contracted form of *sithen* 'since'.
124 **care** 'trouble'.
126 **gent and smal** 'slender and thin'.
127 **ceynt** 'girdle', 'belt'; **barred** 'striped'.
128 **barmclooth** 'apron'
129 **lendes** 'loins'; **goore** 'gusset'.
130 **broyden** 'embroidered'
133 **voluper** 'cap'.
135 **filet** 'head-band'
137 **ypulled** 'plucked'
138 **tho** 'those'; here it means 'they'; **sloo** sloe-berry.
140 **pere-jonette**: a type of sweet pear that is early ripe; possibly a comment on Alisoun?
141 **wether** 'a mature, male sheep'; one might have expected 'lamb'? Again the white colour is continued.
143 **latoun** 'latten', brass-like metal.
144 This line means: 'If you were to search all over this world'
145 **thenche** 'imagine'.
146 **popelote** colloquial: 'doll', 'pet'; **wenche** 'female'; not a complimentary or courtly term.
147-8 These lines mean: 'Her complexion shone much brighter than the newly forged gold coin, the 'noble' [that was forged] in the Tower [of London mint].'
149 **yerne** 'eager', 'lively'
153 **bragot** 'bragget', a fermented drink of beer and honey; **meeth** 'mead', honey-based alcoholic drink.
155 **Wynsynge** 'ever moving'
156 **bolt** 'arrow'.
158 **boos of a bokeler** 'boss (or central part) of a shield'

160 **prymerole** 'primula'; **piggesnye**; lit. 'pig's eye', probably a flower; both names are colloquial words for a lovely girl; cf. *popelote* (146).
161-2 'For any lord to sleep with or any good farmer to marry'
163 This line means 'Now, sir, moreover, sir, it so came about'
165 **rage** 'fool around'
167 **subtil** 'clever'; **queynte** 'crafty', 'devious'
168 **queynte** 'female private parts'; there is a deliberate pun on the two uses of *queynte*; cf. also line 646 *yqueynt* 'quenched'.
169 **but....** 'unless I have my desire'.
170 **deerne** 'secret'; **lemman** 'beloved' < *leof*+*man* 'loved one'; **spille** 'die'
172 **al atones** 'immediately'
174 **trave** 'frame'
175 **wryed** 'twisted'
177 **lat be** 'stop it!'
178 **out harrow** 'help!'
179 **Do wey** 'put away'
180 **gan mercy**... 'asked for pity'; a traditional plea from a courtly lover. *gan* +infin. should be translated as preterite.
181 **profered** 'presented himself`
185 **leyser wel espie** '[when she could] see an opportunity'
186 **jalousie** 'suspicion'
187 **but ye wayte wel** 'unless you carefully wait'.
188 **woot** 'know'
189 **as in this cas** 'in this affair'
191 This line means: ' A student had lazily wasted his time'
194 **tyme** 'opportunity'
195 **everideel** 'everything'
196 **thakked** 'patted'; **lendes** 'thighs'
200 **wirche** 'to work' ('to perform the works of Christ's')
201 **haliday** 'a holy day'
203 This line means:'It [her forehead] was washed so well when she stopped her work'
205 **the which that** 'who'
205 **ycleped** 'called'
206 **Crul** 'curled' [metathesis].
207 strouted 'spread out'
208 **shode** 'hair parting'
209 **rode** 'complexion'
210 **corven** 'carved'
211 **fetisly '**[he went] elegantly
212 **Yclad** 'dressed'; **ful smal and proprely** 'very delicately and elegantly'
213 **kirtel** 'tunic'; **waget** 'light blue cloth'.
217 **myrie child** 'a merry lad'
223 **rubible** 'a small, two-stinged violin' -- perhaps significantly meant as a small, inferior instrument
224 **quynyble** 'high-pitched, treble voice', again suggesting effeminacy
226 **nas** 'was not'

227 **solas** 'entertainment'
228 **gaylard tappestere** 'lively barmaid'
229 **squaymous** 'fastidious'
230 **daungerous** 'disdainful'
233 **Sensynge** 'censing', that is, swinging the censer that contains burning incense above the wives.
236 This line means: 'he thought it a great experience to gaze at her'; *propre* means 'fine', 'respectable' and *likerous* means 'sexy'
239 **hente** 'catch'
246 **For paramours** 'for love's sake'; this is the original meaning of *par amour*.
250 **dressed hym** 'placed himself'; **shot-wyndowe** 'hinged window'; it is important later that the window can open! This reflects the typical fabliau love of detail.
252 **gentil and smal** 'polite and high-pitched'; cf. Alisoun's voice that it is 'loud and lively' (149).
254 **rewe on me** 'pity me
255 This line means: 'harmonising well with his guitar playing'
258 **herestow nat** 'did you not hear' (lit. hearest not thou?)
259 **boures** 'bedroom'
260 **therwithal** 'right away'
261 **Yis** 'Yes indeed'; this is the emphatic form of 'yea'; **every deel** 'every bit [of it]'
262 'And so it goes on; what do you expect?'
264 **hym is wo bigon** 'he is wretched'.
268 **page** 'servant'
269 **brokkynge** 'quavering'
270 **meeth** 'mead', a fermented honey drink
271 **gleede** 'fire'
272 **meede** 'bribe'; cf. Lady Meed in *Piers Plowman*.
274 **strokes** 'beatings'; **gentillesse** 'nobility', 'courtesy'
276 **scaffold** 'platform' for the play.
277 'But what good did it do him?'
281 An expression that probably means he was wasting his time.
284-5 This expression means:' The clever lover close at hand makes the lover that is far away hated.' Lit. 'Always the near, clever one makes the far lover to be hated'.
286 **wood** 'mad'.
288 **nye** 'near'
289 **ber thee wel** 'do your best!'
294 'Agree to this plan'
295 **shapen hym a wyle** 'prepare a trick'
296 **sely** 'innocent', 'naive'.
297 if so be 'if it so turned out that'
299 **hire** 'hers'
300 **mo** 'more'
303 **mete** 'food'
304 'And told her to say to her husband'
306 **nyste** 'didn't know': *ne+wiste*

307 **with ye**; lit. 'with [her] eye'; this phrase is pleonastic and the line means 'she hadn't laid eyes on him all day'.
308 **trowed** 'believed'.
309-10 'For, as her maid could not rouse him by shouting, he wouldn't answer, no matter what happened'.
311 **thilke** 'the same'
313 **leste** 'wished'
315 **merveyle** 'puzzlement'
317 **Seint Thomas;** Thomas à Becket; cf line 183.
318 'Things aren't right with Nicholas'.
319 **God shilde** 'God forbid'
320 **tikel** 'unpredictable', 'uncertain'.
321-2 'Today I saw a corpse carried to church, yet a short while ago, on last Monday, I saw him at work'.
323 **knave** 'servant'
323 **anoon** 'immediately'
324 **clepe** 'call'
326 **gooth hym up** 'takes himself up', 'goes up'; watch the changes in tense in this passage.
327 **whil that** 'as'
328 **wood** 'mad'
330 **how may ye slepen** 'How can you sleep'
334 **ful depe** 'intently'
336 **capyng** 'gaping', 'staring'
337 'As if he'd looked on the new moon'; this could cause lunacy.
338 **soone** 'immediately'
339 **array** 'state'.
340 to blessen hym bigan: 'crossed himself'
341 **Seinte Frydeswyde**; 8th-cent. patron saint of Oxford
342 'Little does a man know what's to happen to him' -- an ironic statement for both John and Nicholas.
343 **astromy**e 'astronomy', probably the error is intended to show John's lack of knowledge.
344 **agonye [lit. agony]** 'mental anguish'
345 'I always thought that it would come to this'.
346 **pryvetee** 'secrets': yet John listens to God's secrets as narrated by John. See Commentary at lines 50-6.
347 **lewed** 'lay', 'unlearned'
348 **his bileve kan** 'knows the Creed' (which begins 'I believe...')
349 **ferde** 'fared'
350 **prye** 'stare'
352 **marle-pit** 'clay pit'
354 **me reweth soore** 'I'm greatly sorry for'
355 **rated** 'criticised'
357 **underspore** 'force upwards'
359 **as I gesse** 'I suppose'; this is the modern American use of 'I guess so'.
360 **gan hym dresse** 'placed himself'
361 This line echoes the Miller in the GP line 1.

362 'And he heaved it off immediately by the latch'.
365 **caped** 'gaped'.
366 **wende** 'thought'
367 **hente** 'grabbed'
368 **spitously** 'violently'.
371 **crouche** 'make the sign of the Cross'; **wightes** 'evil spirits'.
372 **nyght-spel** 'a prayer to protect against night spirits'; **anon**-rightes 'straightaway'
373 **halves** 'corners'
375 **Benedight 'Benedict'** -- a deliberate error to show John's simplicity?
377 **verye** ' evil spirits' (but this word is not found elsewhere; possibly another nonsense word by John.); the white pater-noster lit. 'the white Lord's Prayer'; this was a simple prayer to protect one at night-time, like the night-spell.
378 **wentestow** 'did you go?'.
380 '[Nicholas] sighed pitifully and said, 'Alas!'
381 **eftsoones** 'again'
383 **swynke** 'work'
386 **toucheth** 'concerns'
392 'He got the carpenter to sit beside him.'
393 **lief** 'dear'
394 'You must swear to me here on your pledged word'.
395 **wreye** 'betray'
397 **forlore** 'damned'
398 **han** 'have'
399 'If you betray me, you shall become mad'.
401 'Then said this naïve man, 'I am not a tell-tale'
402 'No, though I say so myself, I am not used to blether'
408 **quarter nyght** = 9 p.m.
412 'All will be drowned, as the rain will be so terrible'
413 'Thus all mankind must drown and lose their life.'
419 'If you will follow advice and counsel'.
421 **trewe** 'wise'
422 **rewe** 'regret it'
428 **lorn** 'lost'
429 **ful yoore ago** 'many years ago'; is this referring to the Flood or when he heard the story?
433 'He would have preferred, I bet'
434 **wetheres** 'male sheep'; surely he had only one? Alisoun in line 141 surprisingly is compared to a wether.
436 **woostou** 'do you know?' [the 'thou' form]
437-8 'This demands speed, and men must not preach or tarry when it's an urgent case.'
439 **into this in**: '[bring] into this inn/boarding house'.
440 **kymelyn** 'tub'
442 **mowe** 'may'
444 **fy on the remenant**! 'to heck with the rest of the time!'
445 **aslake** 'go down', 'subside'
446 **pryme**: 9 a.m.
447 **wite** 'know'

449 **Axe** 'ask': a case of metathesis -- compare *aske* in the same line.
450 **pryvetee** 'secret'
451 'Let it be enough for you [to know], unless you've gone mad'
454 **speed thee heer-aboute** *speed* originally meant 'prosper', as in 'God speed', so 'may you prosper in this matter'. It is possible that the modern meaning is also implied.
458 **purveiaunce** 'preparations'

460 'And [you] have laid out provisions carefully in them'.
464 **gardyn-ward** 'towards the garden'
467 **I undertake** 'I bet'
469 **clepe** 'call out'
475 **ful right** 'very seriously'
477 'When we have entered on board ship'
479 **in his preyere** 'at his prayers'
480 'For it is God's own important command'
481 **fer atwynne** 'far between each other'.
482 'So that there will be no sin [sexual contact] between the two of you'
483 than ther shal in deede 'than there will be in action'.
484 This ordinance is seyd 'this command is [now] given'
487 **abidyng** 'waiting for'
488 **I have no lenger space** 'I have no more time'
492 'Go save our lives, I beg you. *lyf* is in the singular, suggesting that they share a common fate.
496 **war** 'aware [of it]'
497 **queynte cast** 'crafty plan'; cf. the earlier uses of *queynte*; **for to seye** 'all about'
498 **ferde** 'behaved'; **as she wolde deye**: 'as if she'd die [of fear]'
500 **echon** 'every one of us'
501 **verray** 'true, faithful'
503 **affeccioun** 'emotion'
504 **ymaginacioun** 'fancy'
505 'So deeply may an obsession take hold'
508 **walwynge** 'surging'; **drenchen** 'drown'
510 **maketh sory cheere** 'makes a sorrowful expression'
511 **siketh** 'sighs'; **swogh** 'groan'
513 **kymelyn** 'tub'
514 **in** 'inn', 'boarding house'.
517 **ronges and stalkes** 'rungs and uprights [of a ladder]'.
518 **balkes** 'rafters'
519 **hem vitailled** 'put provisions in them'
520 **jubbe** 'jug'
522 **array** 'preparations'
524 **Upon his nede** 'at his requirement'
525 **it drow to nyght** 'night came'
527 **dressed** 'prepared'
529 'They sat quietly a good few minutes away from each other'
530 'Now, say your Lord's Prayer and then shut up'.

532 **devocioun** 'prayer'
533 **biddeth** 'prays'
534 **if he it heere** 'if he hears it'
535 **for wery bisynesse** 'because of tiring labour'
536 'Descended heavily on this carpenter, I suppose'
537 **corfew-tyme** 'curfew', 'dusk'
538 'Because his spirit was distressed he greatly groans'
539 **routeth** 'snores'; **myslay** 'lay awkwardly'
542 **mo** 'more'
543 'There where the carpenter usually lies'
545 **lith** 'lies'
546 **solas** 'joy'
548 **freres** 'religious brothers', 'friars'
551 **Oseneye** probably 'Osney Mead', owned by the abbey
552 **hym to disporte** 'to enjoy himself'
553 'And by chance asked a monk'
555 **drough** 'pulled'
556-7'And said, "I don't know, [but] I haven't seen him working here since Saturday; I think that he has gone for timber".'
558 **ther** 'where'
560 **grange** 'farmhouse'
565 **sikirly** 'surely'
566 **syn** 'since'
567 **So moot I thryve** lit.'so may I thrive'; 'I'm determined'
569 **stant**; the contracted form of *standeth*; **boures** 'bedroom window'
573 'I must have some kind of pleasure, indeed'.
576 'All night I dreamt I was at a feast'
579 **anon** immediately
580 **rist** 'rises'
581 'And dresses himself extravagantly to perfection'
582 **greyn** 'spice' -- a breath sweetener.
584 **trewe-love** 'a four-leaved herb called 'herb-paris' in the shape of a true-love knot; possibly an aphrodisiac; **beer** 'bore, carried'
585 **wende** 'considered [himself] '
587 **stant** 'stands'
588 **raughte** 'reached'
589 **semy soun** 'soft sound'
591 **bryd** 'bird','sweetheart'; **cynamome** 'cinnamon'
592 **lemman** 'lover'
594 **swete ther I go** 'sweat wherever I go'
595 **swelte** 'swelter', 'burn'
596 **moorne** 'yearn'
597 **Ywis** 'Indeed'
598 **turtel** 'turtle-dove'; **moornynge** 'yearning', 'desire'
601 **com pa me** 'come kiss me'

602 **and elles I were to blame**; lit. 'or else I'd be to blame'; 'or I'd be ashamed of myself if I didn't [love another]'
603 **bet** better
605 **a twenty devel wey** 'for goodness sake!' lit. 'in the name of twenty devils'
606 **and weylawey** 'Oh deary me'
607 **yvel biset** 'badly treated'
608 'since I can expect nothing better'
610 'Will you then go away immediately?'
612 **anon** 'immediately'
613 **stille** 'quietly'
614 **hust** 'hush'
616 **at alle degrees** 'in every sense.'
618 'Lover, [give me] your grace and sweetheart, your favour'
619 **undoth**; lit. 'undoes'; 'opens'
620 **Have do, com of** 'Come on, hurry up!'
625 Lit. 'And nothing better or worse happened to Absolon'; 'this is honestly the truth of what happened to Absolon'
626 **ers** 'arse'
627 'Very eagerly, before he knew what he was doing.'
628 **stirte** lit. 'started', 'jumped'; **amys** 'wrong'
629 **wiste** 'knew'
630 **yherd** 'hairy'
631 **do** 'done'
633 **a sory pas** 'in a sorrowful manner'
635 'By God [lit. By God's body] this is great fun'
636 **deel** 'part'
638 quyte 'repay'
639 **froteth** 'rubs'
640 **chippes** 'wood shavings'
642-4 'Damn me [lit. May Satan take my soul], if I wouldn't rather give all this town just to be avenged of this injury'.
645 'Alas that I had not avoided it!'
646 **yqueynt** 'quenched' [a pun on the earlier use of *queynte* in line 168]
648 **kers** 'curse'
649 **maladie** 'sickness'
650 'Very often he denounced love'
651 **ybete** 'beaten'
652 **A softe paas** 'quietly'
653 **cleped** 'called'; **daun**; a title above the smith's rank; translate 'sir' or 'Mr'.
654 **smythed** 'forged'
655 'He sharpens plough-share and coulter [part of the plough] energetically'
656 **al esily** 'quietly'
657 **Undo** 'Open!'
659 **Cristes sweete tree**; an oath, 'By Christ's Cross'.
660 **rathe** 'early'
661 'What's the matter? Some fine girl, I bet'.

662 **viritoot**; a unique word, probably meaning 'hanky-panky'.
663 **Note** 'St Neot', a local saint.
663 **woot** 'know'
664 'This Absolon didn't give a damn'
665 **yaf** 'gave', here 'replied'
666 'He had more important matters in hand'
668 **chymenee** 'fireplace'
669 'Please lend it to me, [as] I have a job for it'
671 **Certes** 'indeed'
672 'Or untold numbers of gold coins in a bag'
674 **foo** 'foe'; Christ's foe is Satan.
678 **he gan to stele** 'he crept out'
681 'just as he did before'
683 **warante it** 'believe it to be'
688 **wel ygrave** 'beautifully engraved'
691 **amenden** 'improve'
692 **ere that he scape** 'before he could escape'
693 'He opened up the window quickly'
697 **noot** = *ne+woot* 'do not know'
699 **dent** 'blast'
700 **yblent** 'blinded'
703 'Off goes about a hand-span stretch of skin'
704 **toute** 'bottom'
705 And he thought he'd die from the pain'
706 **wood** 'mad'
708 **sterte** 'jumped'
709 **as he were wood** 'as if he were mad'
711 **sits** sitteth
713 Lit. 'he did not have time to sell bread or ale' [on the way down]! That is, he fell straight down.
714 **celle** 'floor'
715 **aswowne** 'unconscious'
716 **Up stirte hire** 'Up she jumped'
717 **harrow** 'Help!'
718 **smal and grete** 'poor and rich'
719 'Run [into the house] to stare at the this man'
721 **brosten** 'broken'
722 'But he had to put up with his own injury'
723 **anon bore doun** 'immediately shouted down by'
726 **agast** 'terrified'
727 **fantasie** 'imagination'
730 'And that he begged them'
731 **par campaignie** 'for company'
733 **kiken and they cape** 'they stared and gazed'
734 'And they turned all his injury into a joke'
736 'no one listened to his explanation'

738 **holde wood** 'considered mad'
739 'Every student immediately supported the other [Nicholas?]
740 **leeve** 'dear'
741 **wight** 'person'
742 **swyved**; a crude verb for sexual intercourse
743 **kepyng/jalousye** 'protection/suspicion'
744 **nether ye;** lit. 'her lower eye'
745 **towte** 'bottom'
746 **rowte** 'company'

Commentary

The Miller's Prologue

1-11 The Knight has just told the first tale. Harry Bailey, the Host, thanks the Knight and then asks the Monk to tell the next tale, as he is next in the hierarchy and the most senior of the clerical pilgrims. However, the drunken Miller interrupts the correct order of things.

16 **in Pilates vois** 'in Pilate's voice'; this is a direct reference to contemporary Mystery Plays. Pilate, Christ's judge, was portrayed as an evil man who ranted on the stage.

36 The Reve 'the steward' is also a carpenter. The Reve will tell the next Tale which is about a miller who is made a fool of by two students.

50-8 The Miller states that there are indeed many good wives, but advises the Reeve (and husbands in general) not to investigate their fidelity; as long as the husband gets enough [sexual] pleasure from his wife, he should not question what his wife is otherwise up to.

61 **cherles tale**, a story told by a 'churl' or low person, i.e. fabliau. The term 'fabliau' (plural fabliaux) is not used by Chaucer, but is a later invention. Fabliau is a common medieval genre-term, which flourished particularly in thirteenth-century France; fabliaux are comic tales in verse, often obscene and involving sexual trickery, full of action, often parodying or mocking the courtly. Frequently there is a love triangle that leads to slapstick humour, and, for some modern sensibilities, the results can be cruel. Fabliaux are typically visual, dramatic, concise without any extraneous detail, and fast moving, and written in a straightforward style. In the *Canterbury Tales* the following might be called fabliaux*:* the Tales of *The Miller, The Reeve, The Cook, The Friar, The Shipman and The Merchant*.

106 ***Angelus ad Virginem*** 'The Angel to the Virgin'. This religious hymn is about the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel announces Christ's birth to the Virgin Mary. A potentially blasphemous parallel may be being drawn between the triangle of Mary, Joseph and Gabriel and that of Alisoun, John and Nicholas, since Nicholas is about to approach Alisoun, just as Gabriel approached Mary.

119 **Catoun**; a reference to the 4th-century Dionysius Cato, who is supposed to have written the *Disticha* or *Dicto Catonis*, a collection of maxims or proverbs. *The Distichs of Cato* was a common school book.

126 **wezele** Chaucer, it seems, wishes us to see Alisoun as a lively child of nature with animalistic desires and natural instincts. The weasel, apart from being slim like Alisoun, is generally thought cunning and devious. In this portrait Alisoun is compared to a sheep (wether), a swallow, a kid or calf, a colt, and the other nature images such as milk, sloe-berry, pear tree, barn, ale and meed (*bragot or the meeth*), apples, hay and heath, and primula.

127 Alisoun wears an apron and a *smok* 'shift', has a shining face, etc., which one might expect to find on a miller's wife, yet these lower class features are contrasted with the expensive silk on her smock, headband and purse tassles and the embroidery that suggest a lady. Another feature of this portrait is the fact that only the colours black and white are used.

130-1: 'Her smock was white, embroidered with coal-black silk around the collar from the front round to the back inside and outside the material.'

136 **likerous eye** 'lecherous eye'; this is the only explicit comment on Alisoun's sexuality in the portrait; otherwise, as is typical with Chaucer, we are left to make up our own minds.

142 **purs** . Alisoun's mercenary interests are stressed in the portrait. It would be normal for a mistress of a house to have a purse hanging from her belt, but much attention is given to this purse and it is followed by the description of her complexion compared to a newly-forged coin (noble). Later we hear that Absolon (272-3) offers her money as a bribe and at the end promises her his mother's gold ring in exchange for a kiss.

150 **berne** 'barn'; loud, lively singing like a swallow on a barn and her fooling around like a kid or calf again detract from the ladylike image and make her a lively child of nature, a healthy country wench.

168 Nicholas is described as *hende* 'courteous' or 'handy'; and uses the language of the courtly lover in his speech to Alisoun (169- 70 and 172-3), while groping and grabbing her in a very uncourtly fashion. We may recall that this tale follows the courtly Knight's Tale; we can see how the Miller is *quitting* the Knight and parodying the formality of courtly love.

182 **atte laste** 'eventually'. The courtly lady would take ages before accepting the lover; Alisoun takes exactly two lines of text!

183 **Thomas of Kent**. This is Thomas à Becket, martyred in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. The Canterbury pilgrims are on their way to his shrine, where many miracles took place.

198 **'maketh melodie'**: here and elsewhere this is a euphemism for making love; see line 544 where the couple *make melodie* in bed.

199 Note the juxtaposition of the sexual and the religious. Another good example is at line 547: Nicholas and Alisoun are in bed *making melodie* while outside the church bells are ringing.

204 **parrish clerk:** 'a parish lay priest'; probably not a priest, but one of the lay clergy who assisted the priest at the altar.

205 **Absolon**. This unusual name was probably chosen because of the biblical Absolon, son of King David; see 2 Samuel 14:26. The biblical character came to symbolise pride in the Middle Ages, as the original character had been so proud of his fine hair that it was the cause of his death. Whilst fighting, his beautiful hair was caught in a tree and his enemy stabbed him, hence the stress on Absolon's hair in the following lines.

209 **grey as a goos;** much of the description of Absolon comes from rhetorical handbook instructions on how to describe a lady.

210 **Poules window**. St Paul's window: this could either be a gusset resembling a Gothic arch window or a round rose window. Whatever, it is meant to be in the most modern fashion.

214 this line means: 'very attractive and plentiful were the fasteners'. Chaucer's Parson criticises those who wear tightly fastened clothes: they are guilty of pride. The lover *in Roman de la Rose*, a work Chaucer translated, also has tightly fastened sleeves, as he goes in search of love.

215 **gay surplis** 'an attractive surplice'; one would not expect this clerical garb to be described a 'gay', but Absolon obviously decorated his in an unclerical fashion. It is called in the following line 'as white as is the blossom on the branch', an expression that one might expect in a courtly lyric.

218 Absolon appears to be a man of many parts; he also is a barber, who traditionally would let blood from patients, and did some legal work by selling property (conveyancing) and preparing deeds of settlement. Then come his abilities at dancing, music and socialising in pubs. His dancing talents are undercut by saying that he dances *after the scole of Oxenforde tho*: Oxford, was not well known as a centre for dancing.

231 **jolif** 'jolly', 'lively'; the epithet *jolif* is commonly applied to Absolon, just as *hende* is to Nicholas.

242 Absolon's behaviour in church reflects his ridiculous nature; firstly, he uses this function as bearer of the censer to ogle the women as he walks up and down, and he also refuses to take the offerings from the ladies for *curteisie*; the religious service is turned into some parody of courtly love with himself as the lover.

253 Absolon's song is a parody of a courtly lover's: he confuses the familiar and the polite forms of the second person singular pronouns (thy' (253) and 'yow/ye' (254)

258 The fact that the carpenter, who we know is exceptionally suspicious of his young wife and terrified of being cuckolded, is not at all worried when this young man sings love songs outside their bedroom window, reflects Absolon's reputation.

267 **by meenes and brocage** 'by go-betweens and brockers'; Absolon never confronts Alisoun -- unlike the active Nicholas -- and uses go-betweens. The use of brokers in love affairs was expected in courtly love.

272 A social comment that, whereas country girls are wooed by ale, town girls need financial bribes.

276 **Herod** Another reference to the Mystery Plays (see line 16). Herod in the drama was portrayed as a ranting, mad, evil character; Hamlet talks of 'outheroding Herod', that is over-acting in a wild fashion.

346-56 John here recites a common complaint by the uneducated about the educated, namely that they lack common sense and as their heads are in the clouds they fail to look where they're going.

364-71 We might note the simple syntax: and...and...and, the list of preterite verbs, mostly describing action, and monosyllabic words ('What...what, how, what, looke doun!)

370 'Awake and think of Christ's Passion' (that is, the suffering of Christ on the cross to atone for mankind's sins); this was the cure for the Deadly Sin of Despair (line 365), which was called 'the passion furthest from the love of God' and could (as in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*) lead to suicide.

371-8 John recites a prayer at the four corners of the house and beyond the threshold; the references to the *white pater noster* and *St Peter's sister* are items of folk-magic.

378 **Seinte Petres soster** 'St Peter's sister', mentioned in a *white pater noster*; all these terms reflect the dubious orthodoxy and naivety of John's faith.

381 Nicholas is here preparing John for his Flood hoax.

388-99 It is of course crucial for Nicholas's plan that no one else hears of the Flood. In line 399 Nicholas threatens John with madness if he tells anyone, while at the end of the Tale the narrator states that John is considered mad for believing this story.

404 **'by him that harwed helle'**; here he refers to 'Christ'; lit. 'by him who harrowed hell'. According to the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and the Creed, Christ descended into hell on Holy Saturday and rescued all the good, Old Testament characters, beginning with Adam and Eve, followed by all the Patriarchs.

407 **'moone bright'**; 'I have looked at the bright moon' implies both rain and madness: rain, as, according to contemporary astronomical teaching, the moon influenced rainfall and madness, as it was also meant to cause madness, e.g., 'lunacy'.

408 **Monday next**; As it is already Sunday, Nicholas is talking about the next day. An important element in fabliaux (as in all farce) is speed; also, if John had time to think about things, he would have realised how ridiculous the narrative was, or might even have remembered that God established the rainbow as a sign that he would never send another Flood. Such details are important in the fabliau-genre.

421 **Salomon**; King Solomon is supposedly the author of the biblical Book of Proverbs; he had a reputation for wisdom, thus the saying 'As wise as Solomon'. However, the quotation here is from Ecclesiasticus 32:19: 'Do nothing without counsel and you will not repent later'. Nicholas is building up a case by giving his mad idea Biblical authority.

424 At no point does John think it strange that the world will be repopulated by this threesome!

432 **'the sorwe of Noe'**: 'Noah's sorrow'; there is an apocryphal story, commonly represented in medieval art and literature, that Noah's wife (often made an allegorical representation of the flesh) was unwilling to enter the ark, but wanted to drink and gossip with her friends. Noah has great trouble with this domineering wife and eventually he gets his sons to carry her forcefully into the ark. The story was interpreted as reflecting Christ's (Noah's) difficulty in convincing mankind (Mrs Noah) to be saved. This story appears in many vernacular narratives derived from the Old Testament, e.g., the Mystery Play of Noah's Flood. The usage here suggests that John does not know the biblical account (in which Mrs Noah does not feature), only the common retellings.

437 Nicholas has the brilliant plan that Alisoun must have her very own ark, the excuse being the trouble that Mrs Noah gave her husband.

444 Although the biblical family was forty days on the ark, Nicholas just wants to be one night with Alisoun.

450 The Miller initially said that man must not know God's secrets, and this is repeated by John (346); then Nicholas tells John God's secret about the Flood, and now brushes aside any possible questions by saying that he will not tell God's secrets! As so often in the Miller's tale, the frame creeps into the narrative.

452 **'as greet a grace';** Noah, although saved from the Flood, had a shrewish wife (se note for 432 above), and so the offer may not be so promising.

456 Nicholas presents those to be saved in the order most appealing to John: Alisoun, John and then Nicholas.

461 Nicholas tries to make his narrative as realistic as possible and suggests that John brings an axe to break a hole in the roof when the flood comes, so they can sail away. Of course the axe is necessary in the fabliau plot as well.

468 **'doke after hire drake'**. The animal imagery reminds us of Alisoun's initial portrait.

473 **'lordes al oure lyf'**. Again, Nicholas makes it seem natural that they will be a threesome.

479-80 We might note multiple negation here -- five in two lines. Such negation is cumulative in Middle English; it is used here to stress the seriousness of the warning not to speak.

481 Nicholas also insists that John and Alisoun are hanging far apart on the roof, so that they have no sexual contact.

490 'Men say "Send a wise man and leave everything to him"; you are so wise, I don't have to tell you what to do'. Nicholas has spent some time sermonising 'preaching' and now he compliments John by calling him a wise man who does not need to be told what to do: good psychology.

499-502 Alisoun is the perfect actress, feigning surprise when told of Nicholas's vision and plan and urging her husband on to execute the plot; she finally claims to be John's 'true and faithful wedded wife' (501).

503-5 These lines reflect the Boethian concept of perception coming to us via emotions. This exclamation by the narrator -- 'What a great thing emotion is!' -- is ambiguous; it could either be an ironic comment on Alisoun's promise to remain true to John, or on the following description of the frightened carpenter.

510-12 We might note the rapid succession of active verbs in the present tense, which gives a sense of immediate and rapid movement.

545-7 **'melodie':** an example of 'melody' being used as euphemistically, implying sexual activity. Chaucer neatly juxtaposes this secular 'music making' with the clerical that follows when he introduces the church bells of Lauds, the first canonical 'hour' or service of the day. James Winny has suggested that this juxtaposition makes the monks seem to sing out in praise of Nicholas's sexual success.

569 **'ful lowe'** in typical fabliau style, every feature has a function, and here we are told that the window is low, so that the later encounters are physically possible.

571-2 'yet I cannot but succeed or at least I shall kiss her'. The itching mouth (line 574) is also ironic, as Absolon is going to have an itchy mouth after Alisoun's 'kiss'.

590-9 Absolon here is acting as the courtly lover. He has dressed fastidiously (though it is darkest night), made sure his breath smells sweetly and gave a gentle cough outside Alisoun's window which, we are told, is low on the wall. His ensuing speech is a parody of a courtly

lover's speech, and also of the imagery in the biblical Song of Solomon (sometimes called The Song of Songs). The following verses from the Song of Solomon are significant here: Chapter 4: 10-11 'How much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointment than all the spices! Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb; honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon. Spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon' [are among the spices mentioned in 4: 14]; in chapter 2 the lover is compared to a fair dove (*faire brid* 591) and the voice of the turtle dove (*a turtel trewe* 598).

594 The entire effect of the courtly love song is drastically undercut by the realistic and personal details that Absolon adds, such as sweating, and comparing himself to a lamb wanting to suck a ewe; he also says he is like a maiden who lacks appetite.

601 **'pa'** probably means 'kiss' and may be a childish word; Alisoun simply says: 'God help me, I'll not go along with your "Come give me a little kiss"'.

616-8 Absolon adopts the courtly love attitude of going on his knees and begging his lady for her favour. The fact that he claims to be *lord at alle degrees* ironically echoes John's wish at line 473.

634 This crude passage stresses the contrast between Absolon's dream world of courtly love and the very basic world of human nature in the raw. *To make one's beard* was an idiom meaning ‘to trick someone’.

638 Previously Absolon wiped his mouth dry to receive the 'kiss' (621) and now he's rubbing it with dust, sand, straw, cloth and wood shavings in a desperate and feverish desire to cleanse himself. Normally one would expect him to wash his mouth clean, and the absence of water seems to play an integral part in this Tale. Rain and floods are expected by John, floods that will wash away the sins of the world, as at the first Flood, but in reality there is a total absence of any cleansing water. There is no water for Absolon to wash his mouth, no water for Nicholas to cool his burning posterior, and no water to break John's fall as he plunges from the ceiling.

699-706 The fart is compared to a thunder clap and thunder is connected with rain; again the absence of water is significant, as its cooling and purifying powers would have been greatly appreciated by all! The fart almost blinds Absolon, but in fact Absolon has been guilty of ‘blindness’, in his naivety, for some time. Chaucer often uses physical or mental conditions to reflect inner, moral states, e.g., old age, ugliness and blindness.

710 **'Nowelis flood'**. This phrase appears to be a mixture of Noah and Noel; it reflects John's unlearned and confused state, but there might also be a Chaucerian play of words. Christmas is the time when the Saviour descends to earth bringing love to this world, while John, who thinks he will, like Noah, save the world after the 'second Flood', is also about to descend to earth at record speed!

717 **out/harrow** 'Help!' Alisoun now says these words in earnest.

A MIDDLE ENGLISH GRAMMAR

1. About Middle English

Middle English (ME) is the term used to describe the varieties of English spoken and written from about 1100 to about 1500. ME differed from OE in terms of its status and function. After the Norman Conquest of 1066, the OE written standard, Late West Saxon, gradually fell into disuse. Latin took over from English the documentary functions of the medieval state, and French, the language of the conquerors, for some time competed with English as the language of literary culture.

Of course, English continued to be employed both in speech and in writing. Indeed, there is much more surviving written ME than OE material, and English not only remained the primary spoken language of the vast majority of the population of England but also was rapidly adopted by the descendants of the Norman-French invaders. However, in writing at least, the function of English was for much of the period a local one, catering for local literary tastes and used for the contemporary equivalent of primary education.

As a result, there was no normative form of written English (let alone spoken English) for most of the ME period. Since English had a local rather than a national function, it made pedagogic sense to develop writing systems which reflected closely local patterns of vernacular speech and which were therefore capable of being taught on a ‘phonic’ basis. Thus, when ME was employed in the written mode after 1066, it reflected historical changes and dialectal variation which had been disguised by OE written standardisation, with local patterns of spelling (reflecting, albeit conventionally, local pronunciations), grammar and even lexicon. Since the constraints of the OE standardised usage had been lifted, the full impact of the very substantial contact between English and Norse was expressed in the written mode only after the Norman Conquest. Moreover, ME was profoundly affected by contact with French, above all in lexis.

During the course of the ME period, English re-established itself as an elaborated language of prestige, available for a whole range of literary and documentary functions. As English began once again to take on these national functions, it became communicatively necessary to develop new national norms; and a new standardised form of written English, this time based on the usage of London, began to emerge from the fifteenth century onwards. Although some have argued that this process of standardisation was the result of specific royal initiatives, it seems more likely to have been as a result of the communicative pressures just described; late ME 'standardised' language is essentially a 'colourless', non-localised language allowing a good deal of spelling-variation.

This usage was generally adopted by the early printers, who in turn provided a norm for private spelling-practice from the sixteenth century onwards. At the same time, major changes in the pronunciation of English took place, and new vocabulary, reflecting humanist learning and the discoveries of European explorers, entered the language. These features mark the beginnings of Early Modern English (EModE).

Because of the variety of ME, it is not possible to write a grammar of it in the same way as can be done for West Saxon. In a sense, every ME text has its own grammar. But since most students begin their ME studies with the writings of Chaucer, the usage of the best Chaucerian manuscripts may be taken as a good reference point. Therefore, although I have not hesitated to draw upon other texts where illustration of some common point is required, the principal texts chosen as a source of examples in this chapter are Chaucerian texts: *The Miller's Prologue and Tale*, and *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*. Examples from both these texts are taken from the Ellesmere Manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* (San Marino, California, Huntington Library EL 26.C.9), a copy of the *Tales* which dates from the first decade after Chaucer's death (*ca*. 1399). The Ellesmere text has been chosen because it is by far the best-known manuscript, the basis of most modern editions, and its forms will be or will become familiar to most readers of this book. In some crucial features, though, notably in the inflexion of the adjective, the Ellesmere MS seems to deviate from Chaucer's usage more than other important early MSS. The best-known of these is probably the Hengwrt MS, now Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS 392, which, although almost certainly copied by the same scribe as the Ellesmere text, differs from it linguistically in certain respects.

NOTE: There is a continuing controversy about the precise details of Chaucer's language. In brief, some scholars hold that a manuscript of a late medieval scientific text, *The Equatorie of the Planetis* in MS Cambridge, Peterhouse 75.I, is a Chaucerian holograph, and is evidence for the poet's own usage; others hold that this argument is not yet proven. Given this controversy, it seems inappropriate in an introductory textbook such as this to refer to this text. Moreover, the interest of the *Equatorie*, though considerable for specialists in Chaucerian studies and in late medieval science, is rather restricted, and the range of linguistic usages is necessarily somewhat limited. It should be noted that recent paleographical research by Linne Mooney has identified the Ellesmere/Hengwrt scribe as Adam Pinkhurst, a member of Chaucer's network of employment whom Chaucer seems to refer to in a short poem as *Adam scriueyn*.

Chaucerian/quasi-Chaucerian English was not a ME national norm in its own day; indeed, for much of the ME period, no national norm existed. The comparative familiarity of 'Chaucerian' English to the modern reader is really to do with the vagaries of historical development; Chaucer's English, the English of late-fourteenth-century London, happens to be a principal ancestor of Present-Day standard English and therefore shares features with it. There is considerable linguistic variation, not only between ME texts but also (frequently) internally, within a single text.

The remainder of this Introduction is divided into four main parts: Spelling and Pronunciation, Syntax, Paradigms and Lexicon. Cross-references are given throughout. In each case, the usage is for the most part that of the Ellesmere text, and examples are generally drawn from there. Thus the usage presented here is largely that of a particular manuscript of Chaucer's works; although for convenience the term 'Chaucerian usage' is employed, this is simply a shorthand way of saying, 'the usage of the most authoritative Chaucerian MSS'. Other ME texts will have distinct systems.

2. Spelling and pronunciation

2.1 The alphabet

The alphabet used in the Ellesmere text is much like that of PDE, although a number of the letters have different sound-values from those they have today. The OE letters *æ* 'ash', *ð* 'edh' and runic *ƿ* 'wynn' disappeared early in the ME period, being replaced by *a/e*, *th/þ* and *w* respectively. Certain French practices were transferred to the copying of English.

OE runic þ 'thorn' was retained in ME times until the advent of printing at the end of the fifteenth century, especially in the north and west of England, but it tends to be replaced by *th* as the ME period progresses. It is found rarely in the Ellesmere text, and there largely only in some determiners (e.g. THE, THAT). In the North, it tends to be written in a way which makes it identical to *y*, and indeed some early printers in the sixteenth century adopted the expedient of using *y* to represent *þ* in some determiners, e.g. *ye* THE. Such usages have developed as an 'archaistic' practice in PDE, cf. YE OLDE TEA SHOPPE.

OE *ȝ*, written as < ȝ > (known as 'yogh'), was retained by some scribes, commonly to represent [j] in initial position and [x] elsewhere. It was also used sporadically to represent [w] and occasionally – following contemporary French practice -- for [z]; it is as this last that it is still used in some varieties of present-day cursive handwriting. It does not occur in the Ellesmere text, which uses *gh* medially and *y* initially instead of *ȝ*. *g* replaced *ȝ* for [g]; the form *g* was known to the Anglo-Saxons, but was restricted to texts in Latin. *c* and *k* develop their present-day distribution in the lexicon during this period.

The letter *h* seems to have been used as a diacritic mark to indicate some kind of modification of the letter it followed: thus the development of *th*, *sh* (or *sch*) for OE *sc*, *gh* (which tended to replace *ȝ* medially), *wh* for OE *hw* and *ch* for some realisations of OE *c*. The letter *c*, which had been used to represent [k, tʃ] in OE, developed extra values in ME through the transference to English of a French usage whereby *c* was used for [s]; *c* was not only used in French loanwords (such as *city*) but also extended to native forms (e.g. *mice*, cf. OE *mȳs*).

The letters *u* and *v* were used interchangeably to represent both vowel [u, ʊ] and consonant [v], with *v* generally being used initially, *u* elsewhere.

In OE, *y* had represented a close rounded front vowel [y], but that vowel appears to have been unrounded in many dialects of late OE, merging with OE *i* [i]. *y* then came to be used interchangeably with *i*, especially in environments where contemporary handwriting could be confusing, e.g. before or after *m, n, u*; all these letters could be written using the 'minim' stroke. *o* was used for *u* in similar environments. This accounts for the PDE spellings COME (OE *cuman*), LOVE (OE *lufu*), which could potentially appear as a series of minim strokes in ME.

Following French practice, *ou, ow* replaced OE ʊ‹ in words like *how* and *broun*. In many varieties of ME, *e, o* and sometimes *a* could be doubled to indicate 'length' and this practice remains in PDE with regard to E, O (e.g. GOOD, FEED); cf. ME *good* GOOD, *fleen* FLEE, *taak*

TAKE. *o(o)* also appeared in London ME for words which had *aɤ* in Old English, e.g. *sto(o)n* STONE (OE *stān*), *ho(o)m* HOME (OE *hām*).

2.2 Pronunciation

Our knowledge of ME **pronunciation** derives from the analysis of rhyming verse, reconstruction from later and earlier states of the language, and the interpretation of spelling. As with OE pronunciation, there remain a number of controversial points, and the account given here is very general; also as with OE, it is very important for students not to worry too much about the precise pronunciation of ME. An extremely useful fact is that PDE spelling, if interpreted carefully, provides a good indication of Chaucerian usage. As with OE, the key point about Chaucerian English is that, except in a few special cases governed by convention, all letters were pronounced.

As in OE, **stressed monophthongal vowels** fell into two major classes: long and short. It is not usual to signal these differences in modern editions of ME texts. There is indirect evidence that the long and short vowels of OE developed qualitative as well as quantitative distinctions during the transition to ME, so that the short vowels were more open in quality than their long equivalents.

The short vowels were generally spelt *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, *u*, pronounced [ɪ, ɛ, a, ɔ, ʊ] respectively. **The long vowels** were generally spelt *i/y/ij*, *e/ee*, *e/ee*, *a/aa*, *o/oo*, *o/oo* and *ou/ow*. These forms were pronounced as follows:

PDE form	ME pronunciation	ME example
LIFE	[li:f]	*lyf, lif*
MEET	[me:t]	*meten*
MEAT	[mɛ:t]	*mete*
NAME, TAKE	[na:m, ta:k]	*name, taak*
HOW, TOWN	[hu:, tu:n]	*how, toun*
MOOD	[mo:d]	*mo(o)d*
BOAT, HOME	[bɔ:t, hɔ:m]	*bo(o)t, ho(o)m*

During the sixteenth century there were sporadic shortenings of earlier long vowels, which produced in some present-day varieties a distinction in pronunciation between such pairs as FOOD: GOOD, READ: BREAD. Here the present-day spelling is the key to understanding late medieval practice; in ME times, the pairs of words were pronounced with the same vowel.

In **the vowels of unstressed syllables**, the old qualitative distinctions were already becoming obscured in late OE times. This pattern continued in ME: Chaucer's unstressed vowels seem to have been [ə, ɪ]. Both are usually spelt *e*, *i/y* in the Ellesmere MS, e.g. *olde*, *swerynge*.

The major difference between OE and ME vowel-systems was in **diphthongs**; the OE diphthongs had monophthongised and merged with other sounds, and new diphthongs had emerged in the system through vocalisations of consonants and borrowings from French. Chaucer's system seems to have been as follows:

[aɪ] *ai*, *ay*, *ei*, *ey*, e.g. DAY, GREY

[ɔɪ] *oi*, *oy*, e.g. *joye* JOY*

[ʊɪ] *oi*, *oy*, e.g. *poynt* POINT*

[aʊ] *au*, e.g. *saugh* SAW (verb)

[ɔʊ] *ow*, e.g. *knowe(n)* KNEW

[ɛʊ] *ew*, e.g. *lewd* IGNORANT (cf. PDE LEWD)+

[ɪʊ] *ew*, e.g. *newe* NEW

* quite possibly no longer distinguished in Chaucerian pronunciation

+ very few words in Chaucerian English seem to have been pronounced with [ɛʊ]: besides *lewed*, *fewe* FEW, *shewe(n)* SHOW and *beautee* BEAUTY are the most important.

The **consonant**-system of Chaucerian English was much the same as that found in Present-Day RP and GenAm. The inventory of consonant-sounds in Chaucerian English seems to have been only a little different from that of PDE: /p, b, t, d, k, g, tʃ, dʒ, f, v, θ, ð, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, h, m, n, l, r, w, ʍ, j/ seem all to have been phonemic in ME. The major differences between ME and PDE usages are:

(a) Chaucerian English does not seem to have had any 'silent' letters. Thus *white*, *myghte* were pronounced [ʍi:tə, mɪxtə] respectively.

(b) *gh*, *ȝ* were pronounced [x] medially; *ȝ* was pronounced [j] initially. (*ȝ* is not found in the Ellesmere MS of *The Canterbury Tales*, but is common in other important early Chaucerian MSS.) The usual PDE pronunciation of *gh*, i.e. 'silent GH', appears from the fifteenth century onwards; the pronunciation with [f] in ENOUGH, ROUGH, etc. began to appear from the fifteenth century, but spellings such as *boft* BOUGHT, *dafter* DAUGHTER, showing that the present-day distribution of pronunciations had not become settled, still appear in the eighteenth century.

(c) *Nacioun* NATION, *sure*, etc. were pronounced with [sj] rather than with PDE [ʃ].

(d) Initial *w, k, g* were all pronounced in Chaucer's language in words like *write(n), gnawe(n), kne(e)* KNEE. It seems likely that their employment reflects contemporary secondary articulations of the consonant, e.g. *wr* possibly indicates the pronunciation of /r/ with lip-rounding.

(e) [ʍ, w] remained distinct phonemes in Chaucer's language, /ʍ, w/: thus *wyn* WINE [wi:n], *while* WHILE [ʍi:l]. However, the beginnings of the present-day southern English pronunciation, which has merged the two sounds on /w/, is indicated in some ME dialects, e.g. *wan* WHEN.

This description of Chaucer's pronunciation is necessarily a limited sketch; as with OE, you will see different accounts in different handbooks and editions. It is however, broadly in line with most modern views. It is very important not to worry too much about getting ME pronunciation absolutely correct. Quite apart from anything else, there was certainly a very broad spectrum of accents available to choose from in late medieval London at the time Chaucer lived there.

3. Syntax

In ME, **inflexions** are less important for indicating the relationships between words than they were in OE, so ME is in general much easier for present-day readers to understand – although its greater apparent familiarity can sometimes lead readers to skate over quite significant differences of meaning between ME and PDE.

The ME pattern emerged in the following way. The inflexional systems of OE become obscured during the Late OE and ME periods, probably for a variety of interacting reasons. Nouns, adjectives and determiners are no longer marked for grammatical gender. Verb-endings have been markedly reduced in variety. Case-endings are no longer so distinctive, and are no longer as useful in distinguishing grammatical function. In place of the OE case-system, ME adopts alternative primary strategies to express the relationships between phrases. Optional patterns of OE element-order, which were a matter of stylistic choice in OE, become fixed patterns indicating phrasal relationships, and prepositions, which could often be omitted in OE, are adopted in a much more widespread fashion in ME.

Although the grammatical configuration of Chaucerian English is much more like that of PDE than is OE, there remain differences in detail. Chaucerian English represents a mid-point in the typological sequence OE : ME : PDE; it contains some forms and constructions which point back to OE usage, and others which point forward to later developments.

3.1 The noun phrase

Chaucerian English distinguishes **case**, **agreement** and **number**. Grammatical **gender** is only rarely distinguished in ME, and it is not a characteristic of Chaucerian usage.

The noun phrase: Case, number and agreement

In Chaucerian English, **nouns** are inflected for **number** (singular/ plural), and for the **case** of genitive singular (no case distinction is made in the plural). There are fragmentary traces of the

old dative case, but these need not concern us here. There are some paradigmatic differences between ME and PDE, though these are, unsurprisingly, mostly to do with the greater number of variant paradigms which survive from OE into ME. Function within the clause is now marked primarily by word-order. Only pronouns are still regularly marked for case (as indeed, broadly speaking, they are in PDE).

Agreement, however, remains important in the ME noun phrase, notably with regard to some adjectives and some determiners, although the paradigmatic variation in modifiers is considerably less than in OE.

3.2 Pronouns

As in OE and PDE, ME **pronouns** are categorised by **person**, i.e. first/second/third. Singular third person pronouns (the equivalent of HE/SHE/IT, i.e. *he, s(c)he, it*) are selected on the basis of the sex (i.e. 'natural gender') of the noun to which they refer; the grammatical gender of OE grammar is by Chaucer's time no longer a feature. As in PDE, pronouns can be inflected according to case; cf. *he/his/him* HE/HIS/HIM, etc.

Thou, ye, etc. have special uses in ME. The distinction is roughly comparable with the *tu/vous* distinction in French, where *thou* is not only singular but also intimate and *ye* is regarded as more formal as well as plural. The situation became more complex in EModE.

The **indefinite pronoun** *man* ONE is treated as a third person pronoun; in some varieties of ME, it appears as a reduced form *me*.

The so-called **ethic dative pronoun** used to reinforce a subject-pronoun is fairly common in ME, e.g.:

1 *he wole <u>him</u> no thyng hyde*

HE WILL HIDE NOTHING.

This usage is archaic in PDE, though it was still common in EModE.

The regular **relative pronouns** *that/ †at*, (*†e/the*) *which(e) (that)*, etc. are used in relative clauses, although the relative pronoun is sometimes omitted altogether; the present-day distinction between 'human' WHO(M) and 'non-human' WHICH is not regularly made in ME, e.g.:

2 *This yongeste, which that wente to the toun*

THIS YOUNGEST (MAN), WHO WENT TO THE TOWN

3 *if a preest be foul, on <u>whom</u> we truste...*

IF A PRIEST IN *<u>whom</u> we trust is foul...*

which(e) can be inflected along the lines of adjectives to signal the plurality of its referent, e.g.:

4 *<u>whiche</u> they weren*

WHO THEY WERE

Sporadically *whiche* is used with singular reference when preceded by *the*, e.g. *the <u>whiche</u> pointz* WHICH POINTS. *Who(m)/whos* are basically **interrogative pronouns** in ME. However, *whom* and *whos* can be used as relative pronouns in ME, although *who* seems not to be so used.

The noun phrase: Adjectives

The form of some monosyllabic **adjectives** is governed by the number of the nouns they modify, e.g. *old man* OLD MAN, *olde men* OLD MEN. Moreover, as in OE, there are **strong** and **weak** paradigms for these adjectives in Chaucerian English, whereby, if the adjective is preceded by the determiners THE, THAT, THIS, THOSE, THESE, the weak form is used. Elsewhere, the strong paradigm was generally used.

By Chaucer's time the formal distinctiveness of these paradigms was very slight, e.g. *this olde man* THIS OLD MAN, *this man is old* THIS MAN IS OLD. This distinction seems to have been found only in formal London speech, and had ceased to be observed in Northern Middle English; in the generation after Chaucer it had died out altogether throughout the English-speaking area.

NOTE: Chaucer commonly uses a strong form of the adjective after *a(n)*. This is because *a(n)* was not used as an indefinite article in OE, and thus *an* in *an oold man* simply sustains the inherited strong usage which would have been regular in an OE indefinite phrase, e.g. *eald mann*.

Chaucer also uses a weak adjective in vocative constructions, i.e. when persons are addressed directly; this is an OE usage. Eg.:

5 *Nay, olde cherl, by God, thou shalt nat so*

NO, OLD PEASANT, BY GOD, THOU MUST NOT (DO) SO.

The scribe of the Ellesmere MS has some difficulties with *-e* in adjectives, apparently because it is not a living part of his own language (as it was with Chaucer). When the Ellesmere scribe copied the Hengwrt MS he seems for various reasons to have reproduced Chaucer's usage more closely, and thus the distribution of *-e* is much more regular. In the Hengwrt MS, *-e* is omitted in 'weak' positions only in the speech of the young northern students in *The Reeve's Tale*, but this deviation is probably Chaucerian, and part of the poet's practice of reproducing northern speech-habits; adjectival *-e* disappeared in northern dialects long before it disappeared in the south.

A few adjectives were inflectionally marked in imitation of French usage, e.g. *weyes espirituels* SPIRITUAL PATHS. In this case, also in imitation of French usage, the adjective follows the noun (this can also occur without marking the adjective for agreement, e.g. *heestes honurable* HONOURABLE COMMANDMENTS, rhyming with *the firste table*). It seems likely that phrases such as *theues stronge* are employed for rhyming purposes.

Many adjectives did not follow this pattern and did not inflect to indicate singular/plural, strong/weak; even in Chaucerian English the usage was dying out. For details of adjectival paradigms and for indications of which adjectives were inflected and which were not, see 'Paradigms' below.

Adjectives are frequently used in ME as the head words of phrases which in PDE would more usually be expressed with supplementary nouns, e.g. *the yongeste* THE YOUNG (MEN).

The noun phrase: Determiners

As in PDE, a few **determiners** agree in number with the nouns they modify, though the formal markers can differ somewhat. Some determiners inflect, e.g. *thise men* THESE MEN, cf. *this man* THIS MAN. However, most determiners, such as *the*, do not inflect. An indefinite article *a(n)*, derived from the OE numeral *ān* ONE, was becoming more widespread along PDE lines; *an* was used when the following word began with a vowel, *a* elsewhere. Since *a(n)* was a 'new' form, its syntactic role differed slightly from that of the other determiners with regard to the adjective.

The noun phrase: Numerals

None of the cardinal **numerals** inflects in Chaucerian usage, as a few did in OE, and their usage is much as in PDE. One common practice, which still occurs in certain PDE dialects, is the use of an endingless noun after a numeral, e.g. *foure and twenty yere* TWENTY-FOUR YEARS. Such usages are generally accounted for as survivals of the OE numeral + genitive plural construction, or of OE nouns with an endingless plural. The sequence of numbers in *foure and twenty* may also be noted. It is comparatively rare in present-day varieties of English, but not unknown; cf. also Present-Day German *vier und zwanzig*.

3.3 The verb phrase

The special set of grammatical categories involved in the **verb phrase** are relevant to ME studies as well, i.e. agreement, finiteness, simple and complex verb phrases, person, tense, mood, aspect and voice. Of course, the formal expression of these categories was not the same in ME as in OE.

ME uses both **simple** and **complex** verb phrases for various purposes. A feature of OE often retained into ME is the 'split' between auxiliary and lexical verbs in complex verb phrases, e.g.:

6 *he <u>kan</u> no difference* <u>fynde</u>

HE <u>CAN FIND</u> NO DIFFERENCE.

The verb phrase: Agreement, person and number

As in OE, there is **agreement** between subject and predicator, e.g. *he bindeth* HE BINDS; *they binden* THEY BIND. Finite verbs are thus inflected according to **person** and **number**, e.g. *I binde, thou bindest, he bindeth, they binde*.

The verb phrase: Tense and aspect

Finite verbs are also inflected for **present and preterite tense**, e.g. *sche loueth, sche loued*. The '**historic present**', whereby a formal present tense is used with a past-tense meaning, is not found in OE. However, it is common in Chaucerian English, e.g.:

7 *This yongeste, which that wente to the toun, ful ofte in herte he rolleth up and doun...*

THIS YOUNGEST (MAN), WHO WENT TO THE TOWN, VERY OFTEN HE REVOLVES IN HIS HEART...

Complex verb phrases are also used to express tense and aspectual distinctions. With regard to the **future tense**, in ME, *wol/schal*, etc., the reflexes of OE *willan, sculan*, etc., frequently retain the lexical significance they carried in OE (**volition** and **obligation** respectively), e.g.:

8 *Oure sweete Lord God of hevene...wole that we comen alle to the knowleche of hym*

OUR SWEET LORD GOD OF HEAVEN...WISHES THAT WE ALL COME TO KNOWLEDGE OF HIM

9 *...he shal first biwaylen the synnes that he hath doon*

HE MUST FIRST BEWAIL THE SINS THAT HE HAS DONE.

However, it could be argued that they are used simply as future auxiliaries as well in examples such as

10 *Now wol I yow deffenden hasardye*

NOW I ?SHALL/WANT TO FORBID YOU (FROM PURSUING) GAMBLING.

Since volition generally implies futurity, the extension of the construction to take over expression of the simple future tense was always a potential development. Future time could also, as in OE, be expressed by the simple present tense.

Other tense and aspectual distinctions can be expressed in ME as they are in PDE, with the use of auxiliaries followed by lexical verbs, although the range of forms is not as large; thus the common PDE AM + -ING construction (e.g. I AM GOING, I WAS GOING), used to express

progressive aspect, is not common in ME, and simple verb phrases are used instead. **Perfect aspect combined with past tense** can be expressed, as in PDE, by means of complex verb phrases. When the lexical verb is **transitive**, i.e. capable of governing a direct object, then reflexes of OE *habban* are used, e.g.:

11 *whan a man <u>hath dronken</u> draughtes thre*

WHEN A MAN <u>HAS DRUNK</u> THREE DRAUGHTS

When the verb is **intransitive** (i.e. not capable of governing a direct object) the reflexes of PDE BE are used, e.g.:

12 *At nyght <u>was come</u> into that hostelrye wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye*

AT NIGHT ABOUT TWENTY-NINE (FOLK) IN A COMPANY <u>HAD COME</u> INTO THAT HOSTELRY.

Gan (from OE *ginnan* BEGIN) is sometimes used as a past-tense auxiliary, e.g.:

13 *This olde man <u>gan looke</u> in his visage*

THIS OLD MAN LOOKED INTO HIS FACE

The verb phrase: Voice

Reflexes of OE *weorpan* BECOME are still found occasionally in Chaucerian English (ME *worthe(n)*, etc.) to express **passive voice**. However, the usual methods for expressing passive voice in ME are either by using the verb *ben*, as in PDE, e.g.:

14 *He is...yholde the lasse in reputacioun*

HE IS CONSIDERED...THE LESS IN REPUTATION.

or, as in OE, by using the indefinite pronoun *man*. The PDE construction linking passive and **progressive** elements, e.g. WAS BEING BOUND, is unknown in ME; instead the form *be* + past participle is employed, e.g.:

15 *Biforn a cors, was caried to his graue*

IN FRONT OF A CORPSE [WHICH] WAS BEING CARRIED TO ITS GRAVE.

The verb phrase: Mood

During the course of the ME period, the formal **indicative/subjunctive mood** distinctions characteristic of OE generally collapsed, although vestiges of the older usage remain, as in PDE, in formal usage, e.g.:

16 *if that yow <u>be</u> so leef to fynde Deeth*

IF YOU <u>ARE</u> (cf. PDE formal <u>BE</u>) SO DESIROUS OF FINDING DEATH.

The reflexes of PDE MAY, MIGHT – in Chaucerian English *may* and *might(e)* – became extended in meaning during the course of the ME period. Their original sense was CAN, COULD, and they usually retain these meanings in Chaucerian English, e.g.:

17 *the feend...putte in his thoughte that he sholde poyson beye, with which he <u>myghte</u> sleen his felawes tweye*

THE DEVIL...PUT INTO HIS THOUGHT THAT HE SHOULD BUY THE POISON, WITH WHICH HE <u>COULD</u> KILL HIS TWO COMPANIONS.

However, there is an obvious semantic overlap between MAY/MIGHT 'hypothesis' and CAN/COULD 'possibility' even in PDE, and so, as the old formal subjunctive disappeared, ME *may/might*, etc. could easily be extended to take over the functions of that construction. An example such as

18 *Thanne may we bothe oure lustes al fulfille*

THEN WE ?MAY/CAN BOTH FULFIL ENTIRELY OUR DESIRES

demonstrates the overlap.

The verb phrase: Impersonal and phrasal verbs

The main syntactic innovation in the verb phrase during the ME period was the rise of two kinds of construction: the **impersonal verb**, and the **phrasal verb**. The former, found in OE, became extended in use during the ME period. It may be exemplified by *us thynketh* IT SEEMS TO US, *hem thoughte* IT SEEMED TO THEM was highly restricted in context in EModE times, and has now largely disappeared. The latter construction, still common in PDE, consists of a verb followed by another element which seems closely tied to it semantically, e.g. GET UP, WAKE UP, LOOK UP. Typically, phrasal verbs in PDE are rather colloquial in register; typically also, they tend to have formal-register near-synonyms, cf. ARISE, AWAKE, CONSULT.

The verb phrase: Negation

As in OE, **negation** is expressed in ME by the negative particle *ne*, frequently assimilated to the words it precedes (e.g. *nis* = *ne* + *is*); cf. *nas* WAS NOT. In ME it is often reinforced by a postverbal particle *nat*, *nought*, etc; toward the end of the ME period, and thus usually in Chaucerian English, it became common to drop *ne* and use *nat*, etc. alone, e.g. *if he wol nat*

tarie IF HE DOES NOT WISH TO WAIT. As in OE, multiple negation was not stigmatised: *he nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde* HE NEVER YET SPOKE ANY COARSE SPEECH

3.4 Sentence structure

Word-order

ME **word-order** patterns are much like those of PDE with the same range of prototypical and deviant usages. The usual order of elements, in both main and subordinate clauses, is SP (i.e. subject–predicator), where the predicator immediately follows the subject, e.g. (with subject and predicator underlined):

19 *If that <u>a prynce useth</u> hasardye...*

IF A PRINCE PRACTISES GAMBLING...

However, this usage can, as in PDE, be deviated from for stylistic reasons in order to place some other element in thematic position in a clause or sentence, e.g.:

20 *This tresor hath Fortune unto us yiven, in myrthe and jolitee oure lyf to lyven*

FORTUNE HAS GIVEN TO US THIS TREASURE IN ORDER TO LIVE OUR LIFE IN MIRTH AND JOLLITY.

When a complex verb phrase is employed, the lexical element tends to appear at the end of the clause, e.g. (with lexical element underlined):

21 *the feend...putte in his thought that he sholde poyson <u>beye</u>*

THE DEVIL PUT INTO HIS MIND THAT HE SHOULD <u>BUY</u> POISON. <-

Despite what has just been said, S...P (subject–predicator) is still sometimes found, especially when the object of the clause is a pronoun, e.g.:

22 *This olde man ful mekely hem grette*

THIS OLD MAN GREETED THEM VERY HUMBLY.

And a delayed verb phrase can still appear occasionally in subordinate clauses, e.g.:

23 *Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote the droghte of March hath perced to the roote...*

WHEN APRIL WITH ITS SWEET SHOWERS HAS PIERCED TO THE ROOT THE DROUGHT OF MARCH...

PS (predicator–subject) is still often found when the clause begins with an adverbial, e.g.:

24 *unnethe ariseth he out of his synne*

HE SCARCELY RISES OUT OF HIS SIN (with simple verb phrase)

25 *at many a noble armee hadde he be*

HE HAD BEEN ON MANY A NOBLE MILITARY EXPEDITION (with splitting of the complex verb phrase).

It is also found in questions, e.g.:

26 *Why lyvestow so longe in so greet age?*

WHY DO YOU LIVE SO LONG IN(TO) SUCH GREAT AGE?

NOTE: The so-called 'dummy' *do*, characteristic of PDE in such constructions, appears in EModE; it is not a feature of ME question-constructions.

Sentence Structure: Clauses

ME has a range of different **clause**-types, both coordinated and subordinated. These clauses are no longer generally distinguished in Chaucerian English, as they were in OE, by word-order.

Coordinating conjunctions include *and, but*, etc., as in PDE, e.g.:

27 *And forth he gooth...into the toun, unto a pothecarie, and preyde hym that he hym wolde selle som poyson...*

AND HE GOES FORTH...INTO THE TOWN, TO AN APOTHECARY, AND BEGGED HIM THAT HE WOULD SELL SOME
POISON...

Subordinate clauses can be introduced, as in OE, by a range of **subordinating conjunctions**. The forms of these conjunctions are much as in PDE, except that the particle *that* often (although not always) appears along with *if, whan*, etc., e.g. *Whan that Aprill*...WHEN APRIL...*If that a prynce* IF A PRINCE, *how that the seconde heeste* HOW THE SECOND COMMANDMENT, *whil that thou strogelest* WHILE YOU STRUGGLE, *er that he dide* BEFORE HE DID; beside *whan he came* WHEN HE CAME, *if he be baptized* IF HE IS BAPTISED. The option of using *that* has obvious metrical advantages, and there is evidence that metre seems to have been a determining factor in Chaucer's selection or omission of *that* in such constructions.

Relative clauses are commonly introduced by *that* in ME. A slightly confusing feature is that they can sometimes be separated from the noun phrases they modify, something not possible in PDE, e.g.:

28 *God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde*

MAY GOD, WHO REDEEMED MANKIND, SAVE YOU.

Sometimes a relative clause is used without a relative pronoun when that pronoun is in subject position; this usage occurs in OE and EModE, but is not known in PDE, e.g.:

29 *Biforn a cors, was caried to his graue*

IN FRONT OF A CORPSE, WHICH WAS BEING CARRIED TO ITS GRAVE.

Adverbial clauses without subordinating conjunctions are also found in ME, e.g.:

30 *Bledynge ay at his nose in dronkenesse*

CONTINUALLY BLEEDING AT HIS NOSE IN DRUNKENNESS.

Comparative clauses are common, e.g.:

31 *And two of vs shul strenger be than oon*

AND TWO OF US MUST BE STRONGER THAN ONE.

Sometimes the conjunctions characteristic of comparative clauses are used correlatively, e.g.:

32 *right as they hadde cast his deeth bifoore, right so they han hym slayn*

JUST AS THEY HAD PLANNED HIS DEATH EARLIER, JUST SO THEY HAVE SLAIN HIM.

Sentence Structure: Some special features

Chaucerian English still retains some special features of OE sentence-structure which are not a prototypical feature of PDE usage: recapitulation and anticipation and the splitting of heavy groups. The third feature characteristic of OE sentence-structure, parataxis, is not so salient a feature of Chaucer's practice, but it is found in many varieties and genres of ME.

In **recapitulation and anticipation** an anticipatory noun phrase is recapitulated later in the clause by a pronoun, e.g.:

33 *<u>This yongeste</u>, which that wente to the toun, ful ofte in herte <u>he</u> rolleth up and doun*

<u>THIS YOUNGEST</u> (MAN), WHO WENT TO THE TOWN, VERY OFTEN <u>HE</u> REVOLVES IN SPIRIT...

34 *<u>The worste of hem</u>, <u>he</u> spak the first word*

<u>THE WORST OF THEM</u>, <u>HE</u> SPOKE THE FIRST WORD.

35 *<u>alle the gretteste that were of that lond</u>, pleyynge atte hasard he <u>hem</u> fond*

ALL THE GREATEST WHO WERE FROM THAT LAND, HE FOUND THEM PLAYING AT GAMBLING.

The splitting of heavy groups also survives into ME, e.g.:

36 *Thy tonge is lost, and al thyn honeste cure*

YOUR TONGUE AND YOUR CARE FOR HONOURABLE THINGS ARE LOST

37 *An oold man and a povre with hem mette*

AN OLD AND POOR MAN MET WITH THEM.

Stylistic developments between OE and late ME times meant that writers could choose between the older **paratactic** style characteristic of OE and a newer **hypotactic** style which seems to have been brought into Engish through contact with French. Chaucerian usage was basically hypotactic, with quite complex subordination; but some writers, such as Malory, seem consciously to have sustained the older paratactic usage as a sign of traditional values.

4. Paradigms

Paradigms are the model patterns for the various word-classes, and this section gives an outline of ME usage, demonstrating the reflexes of the OE configuration.

The usage here represents for the most part that of the Ellesmere MS of the *Canterbury Tales*, but examples are also drawn from other texts so that a broad characterisation of ME patterns can be given.

Since paradigmatic choice depends on syntactic function, reference should be made to section 3 above throughout.

4.1 Nouns

The five OE **noun**-declensions survive into ME, but there are numerous reorganisations and merging of categories. By the time of Chaucer, there was a Basic Declension, whose essential characteristics derive from the OE General Masculine Declension, and a set of Irregular Declensions deriving from the other four OE declensions. The **Basic Noun Declension** was as follows:

Case	Singular	Plural
Nom.	*stoon* STONE	*stoones*
Acc.	*stoon*	*stoones*
Gen.	*stoones*	*stoones*

Dat.	*stoon(e)*	*stoones*

Most ME nouns are declined on this pattern, e.g. *fish* FISH, *bo(o)k* BOOK, *lond* LAND. A sub-group where the nominative singular ends in *-e* follows a generally similar pattern, e.g. *herte(s)* HEART(S), *soule(s)* SOUL(S). Sometimes the inflexional *-e-* is replaced by *-y-*, e.g. *swevenys* DREAMS; sometimes it is dropped altogether, especially in nouns of more than one syllable, e.g. *naciouns* NATIONS. It will be observed that *-e* occasionally appears in the dative case; this use is largely restricted in the Ellesmere MS to what seem to have been a few formulaic expressions, e.g. *in londe* IN (THE) LAND.

In Chaucerian English, there are only a few exceptions to this paradigm, and these may be termed the **Irregular Declensions**. These are relics of OE Declensions (2)–(5), and in general they demonstrate deviant plural forms (genitive singular forms follow the Basic paradigm). Examples are: *oxen* OXEN, *eyen* EYES and the variant form *foon* FOES (beside *foos*); *feet* FEET beside *foot* FOOT, *gees* GEESE beside *goos* GOOSE; and nouns with endingless plurals such as *sheep* SHEEP, *deer* DEER and variant forms such as *thyng* THINGS, *hors* HORSES (beside *thynges*, HORSES). It will be observed that many of these exceptions are also found in PDE; some are found in some varieties but not in standard English, cf. *een* EYES in Scots.

A few nouns have forms of the genitive which differ from that of the Basic declension. Some are endingless, e.g. classical names whose nominative forms end in *-s*, e.g. *Epicurus owene son* EPICURUS' OWN SON, and some native forms *my fader soule* MY FATHER'S SOUL.

In other ME texts, more of these exceptions survive; e.g., in *Sir Orfeo*, a text whose manuscript dates from the generation before Chaucer, forms such as *berien* BERRIES, *honden* HANDS are also found.

4.2 Pronouns

ME **pronouns**, as those of PDE, retain number, person and case distinctions, and are also used to signal the gender of their referents when in the third person. However, the gender reference is not based on grammatical gender, as it was in OE, but on so-called natural gender, i.e. sex-distinctions. The case-distinctions, between nominative, accusative, genitive and dative, are those found in OE.

The Chaucerian **pronoun-paradigms** are as follows:

First person

Case	Singular	Plural
Nom.	*I* (rarely *ich*)	*we*
Acc.	*me*	*us*
Gen.	*my(n)(e)*	*our(e)(s)*

Dat.	*me*	*us*

Second person

Case	Singular	Plural
Nom.	*thou/thow*	*ye*
Acc.	*the(e)*	*you/yow*
Gen.	*thy(n)(e)*	*your(e)(s)*
Dat.	*the(e)*	*you/yow*

Third person

	Singular			Plural
Gender	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	All genders
Nom.	*he*	*she*	*it/hit*	*they*
Acc.	*hym/him*	*hir(e)/hyr(e)*	*it/hit*	*hem*
Gen.	*his*	*hir(e)(s)*	*his*	*hir(e)(s)*
Dat.	*hym/him*	*hir(e)/hyr(e)*	*it/hit*	*hem*

The accusative and dative in all pronouns are the same; this is because these two categories of pronoun may be considered to have merged in Chaucerian English.

When the subject-form of the second person singular pronoun is preceded by its verb, it frequently merges with that verb, thus: *lyvestow?* DO YOU LIVE?

The inflexion of the **relative pronoun** *which(e)* was discussed above; it seems that it sporadically behaved in formal terms like an adjective. The pronoun *who* had the following paradigm: *who*, *whom* (acc.), *whos* (gen.). All three forms could be used as **interrogative pronouns**; *whom* and *whos* were used as relative pronouns, but *who* seems not to have been so used. By far the most common relative pronoun was *that*, which was indeclinable.

4.3 Determiners

Chaucerian English, unlike OE, has an **indefinite article**, *a(n)* whose distribution was the same as in PDE, i.e. *an* pre-vocalically and *a* elsewhere.

The true **definite article** in English emerges during the ME period. The definite article in Chaucerian English was *the*, and was indeclinable. The OE inflected determiner equivalent to *the* (i.e. *se, seo, þæt,* etc.) was replaced by the indeclinable forms early in the ME period.

The **demonstrative determiners** were however inflected, as in PDE agreeing with their headword in number, i.e. *that* THAT, *tho* THOSE; *this* THIS, *thise/these* THESE, but the large number of inflexions found in OE texts had disappeared. There is uncertainty as to the pronunciation of *e* in *thise*. Metrical evidence suggests that the *-e* on *thise/these* was not pronounced, and was simply a written-mode marker of plurality.

4.4 Adjectives

Chaucerian English sometimes distinguishes between **strong** and **weak** paradigms of **adjectives**, although the range of inflexional distinctions is considerably smaller than it was in OE times.

Chaucerian adjectives may be classified into the following groups:

(1) Adjectives derived from OE which distinguish strong and weak paradigms. These are reflexes of OE adjectives such as *eald* OLD, *gōd* GOOD, *lang* LONG, *geong* YOUNG. In Chaucerian English the paradigm is as follows: *old* OLD (strong singular), *olde* (strong plural), *olde* (weak singular), *olde* (weak plural)

(2) Adjectives derived from OE which do not distinguish strong and weak paradigms. These fall into two sub-groups: (a) Adjectives whose OE nom masc sg strong ended in *-e*, e.g. *wilde* WILD, *swēte* SWEET, *clǣne* CLEAN, *grēne* GREEN; cf. Chaucerian *wilde*, *sweete*, *clene*, *grene*. (b) Adjectives which were polysyllabic in OE, e.g. *hālig* HOLY, *lȳtel* LITTLE; cf. Chaucerian *hooly*, *litel*. These adjectives are indeclinable in Chaucerian English.

(3) Adjectives derived from other languages, e.g. *large* AMPLE, GENEROUS. Such adjectives are indeclinable in Chaucerian English. The only forms in this group that occasionally inflect are those where French practices of inflexion have been transferred to English, e.g. *weyes espirituels* SPIRITUAL PATHS.

NOTE: A relic of the old genitive plural is occasionally found, e.g. *Oure Hoost...was oure aller cok* OUR HOST...WAS (AWAKENING) COCKEREL FOR ALL OF US, where *aller* is the reflex of OE *ealra*. The expression seems to be a formulaic one, and no longer productive in ME.

Comparison of adjectives follows a simple pattern very like PDE usage, with regular *-er/-re, -est* and broadly the same irregular forms as appear in PDE (e.g. *good: bettre: best(e)*).

4.5 Adverbs

In general, Chaucerian **adverbs** end in *-e*, *-ly* and (rarely) *-liche*, e.g. *brighte* BRIGHTLY, *unkyndely* UNNATURALLY, *roialliche* ROYALLY.

4.6 Verbs

As in OE and PDE, ME **verbs** fall into three categories: **weak**, **strong** and **irregular**, and the assignment of verbs to these categories is broadly in line with the assignment of such verbs in earlier and later states of the language. As is the case in OE and PDE, ME verb paradigms take account of **person**, **number**, **tense** and **mood**.

Here are three **model conjugations**: *binde(n)* TO BIND, a typical strong verb; *love(n)* TO LOVE, a typical weak verb; and the most important irregular verb, *be(e)(n)* TO BE.

(1) *binde(n)* TO BIND

	Indicative	Subjunctive
Present		
1st person sg	*binde*	*binde*
2nd person sg	*bindest*	*binde*
3rd person sg	*bindeth*	*binde*
All persons pl	*binde(n)*	*binde(n)*
Preterite		
All persons sg	*bounde*	*bounde*
All persons pl	*bounde(n)*	*bounde(n)*
Imperative:	*bind* (sg)	*bindeth* (pl)
Participles		
Present	*bindyng(e)*	Past *(y)bounde(n)*

(2) *love(n)* TO LOVE

	Indicative	Subjunctive
Present		
1st person sg	*love*	*love*
2nd person sg	*lovest*	*love*

3rd person sg	*loveth*		*love*
All persons pl	*love(n)*		*love(n)*
Preterite			
1st/3rd persons sg	*lovede*		*lovede*
2nd person sg	*lovedest*		*lovede*
All persons pl	*lovede(n)*		*lovede(n)*
Imperative:	*love* (sg)		*loveth* (pl)
Participles			
Present	*lovyng(e)*	Past	*(y)loved(e)*

(3) *be(e)(n)* TO BE

	Indicative	Subjunctive
Present		
1st person sg	*am*	*be*
2nd person sg	*art*	*be*
3rd person sg	*is*	*be*
All persons pl	*be(e)(n)/ ar(e)(n)*	*be(e)(n)/ar(e)(n)*
Preterite		
1st/3rd persons sg	*was*	*were*
2nd person sg	*were*	*were*
All persons pl	*were(n)*	*were(n)*
Imperative:	*be* (sg)	*be(th)* (pl)
Participles		

Past		*be(e)(n)*

NOTE: Optional elements in a number of places in these paradigms may be noted, e.g. the *y-* prefix on past participles (descended from OE *ge-*). In Chaucerian English, these optional elements were frequently employed for metrical reasons. Some optional elements were only found in certain dialects; thus, for instance, *y-* does not appear in northern varieties of ME.

More about strong verbs

Binden can act as the general model for all strong verbs; however, as in OE and PDE, there are several classes of strong verb in ME marked by varying patterns of alternation in stem vowels. For ease of comparison with OE practice, the ME reflexes of the same classes are given here, although sometimes different model verbs have been chosen.

The principal parts given here are (1) the infinitive, (2) the third person preterite, (3) the plural preterite and (4) the past participle; the third person present singular is no longer as distinct from the rest of the paradigm as it could be in OE. It will be observed that some of the old distinctions between classes of strong verbs have disappeared. The roman numerals refer to classes of strong verb corresponding to those in OE.

I	WRITE	*write(n)*	*wroot*	*write(n)*	*(y)write(n)*
II	CREEP	*crepe(n)*	*crepte, cre(e)pe*	*crepe(n)*	*(y)crope(n)*
III	BIND	*binde(n)*	*bounde*	*bounde(n)*	*(y)bounde(n)*
IV	BEAR	*bere(n)*	*ba(a)r, beer*	*bare(n), bere(n)*	*(y)bore(n)*
V	TREAD	*trede(n)*	*trad*	*trode(n)*	*(y)trode(n)*
VI	SHAKE	*shake(n)*	*shook*	*shoke(n)*	*(y)shake(n)*
VII	HOLD	*holde(n),*	*held*	*helde(n)*	*(y)holde(n), helde(n)*
	KNOW	*knowe(n)*	*knew*	*knewe(n)*	*(y)knowe(n)*

Some verbs that were contracted in OE appear as follows in Chaucerian English. Not all variants are given.

V	SEE	*se(n)*	*saugh*	*sawe(n)*	*(y)seyn*
VI	SLAY	*slee(n)*	*slough*	*slowe(n)*	*(y)slayn*

More about weak verbs

The OE class-distinctions in weak verbs had largely died out by Chaucer's time. The only common form to display a distinctive paradigm is *have(n)* HAVE, which belonged to the OE weak Class III:

III HAVE *have(n)* *hadde* *hadde(n)* *(y)had*

The distinction between weak Classes I and II had disappeared by Chaucer's time, although there are occasional relicts of a distinctive Class II paradigm in earlier texts such as *Sir Orfeo*, e.g. *aski* ASK (infinitive).

More about irregular verbs

As in OE, ME irregular verbs fall into two groups: (1) **preterite-present verbs**, and (2) **anomalous verbs**. Here are the principal parts of some common irregular verbs, plus the third person present
singular.

Group I

KNOW *wite(n)*; *wo(o)t*; *wiste*; *wiste(n)*; *(y)wist*

OWE (cf. OE OWN) no infin.; *oweth*; *oughte*; *oughte(n)*; *owed*

KNOW *conne(n)*; *can*; *coude*; *coude(n)*; *coud*

BE ABLE TO *mowe(n)*; *may*; *myghte*; *myghte(n)*;
no past participle

BE OBLIGED TO no infin.; *shal*; *sholde*; *sholde(n)*; no past participle

BE ALLOWED no infin.; *moot*; *moste**; *moste(n)**; no past participle

* Sometimes used with an evident present-tense meaning.

Group II

WANT TO no infin.; *wil(e)/wol(e)*; *wolde*; *wolde(n)*; no past participle

NOT WANT TO no infin.; *nil(e)*;*nolde*;*nolde(n)*; no pasat participle

DO *doon*;*doth*;*dide*;*dide(n)*;*(y)don*

GO *goon*;*goth*;*yede/wente*;*yede(n)/wente(n)*; *(y)gon*

4.7 Numerals

ME **numerals** are divided into **cardinal** and **ordinal** categories. Here are the ME cardinal numbers 1–10, 100 and 1000, and equivalent ordinals for 1st–10th in the variety of language represented by the Ellesmere and contemporary London MSS:

	Cardinal	Ordinal
1	*oon*	*first(e)*
2	*two(o)*	*seconde, secunde*
3	*thre(e)*	*thridde, thirde*
4	*four*	*ferthe, fourthe*
5	*five*	*fifthe*
6	*sixe*	*sixte*
7	*sevene*	*seventhe*
8	*eighte*	*eighthe*
9	*nine*	*ninthe*
10	*ten*	*tenthe*
100	*houndred*	
1000	*thousand*	

5. Lexicon

It is probably best to study ME vocabulary in the context of a general history, e.g. Barber (1993), Baugh and Cable (1993), Strang (1970). These notes simply indicate some general points.

5.1 Borrowing

A characteristic feature of ME is its habit of borrowing from other languages to increase its wordstock. There seem to have been three reasons for this hospitality towards loanwords: (1) there was large-scale contact between English-speakers and users of other languages, notably varieties of Norse and French; (2) the 'Latin renaissance' of the twelfth century meant widespread use of Latin for documentary purposes, and thus the potential for greater 'leakage'

from Latin into ME; and (3) since ME was a much less inflected language than OE, it was easier to adapt words from foreign languages for the syntactic structures of the borrowing language.

It should be noted that the general effect of loanwords was to increase the size of the English vocabulary; PDE now has (in comparison with OE, and also some modern Western European languages) a very large lexicon. This development is largely the result of interaction with Norse, Latin and French, much of it during the ME period. Many OE words were lost during the ME period, some being replaced by loans, e.g. OE *earm* 'poor' (from Old French *povre*, cf. Present-Day French *pauvre*). Other OE words became dialectally restricted during the ME period, e.g. *attercop* 'spider', which is now only found in a few PDE dialects (e.g. that of Lancashire).

There are three main sources of loanwords into English during the ME period: Norse, Latin and French.

Many **Norse** words were actually borrowed into the spoken mode during the OE period but had been 'hidden' by the standardised written record and only appeared in ME times. Most express very common concepts, cf. PDE BAG, BULL, EGG, ROOT, UGLY, WING, and it is noticeable that Norse has supplied English with such basic features as the third person plural pronoun, THEY/THEM/THEIR. Some, though not all, of these forms are found in Chaucerian English; Chaucer still uses *ei* (from OE) rather than *egg*, and only the nominative form of the third person plural pronoun derived from Norse (thus he uses Norse-derived *they* beside OE-derived *hem*, *hire*). Interestingly, some Norse words which had cognates in OE developed distinct meanings when borrowed into English. The PDE forms SHIRT, SKIRT derive from the cognates *scyrte* (OE) and *skyrta* (OE) respectively. Originally the two words referred to the same item of clothing, but they developed different meanings in English, possibly because of slightly different fashions of dress in English and Norse cultures.

A number of **Latin** words came directly into English during the ME period, largely as learned words carried over in the translation of Latin texts, e.g. *testament*, *omnipotent*, although some may have come into English through French, e.g. *purgatorie*. However, the great wave of Latin borrowings into English takes place from the fifteenth century onwards, during the EModE period, with the rise of humanism.

By far the largest number of words borrowed into English during the ME period are taken from varieties of **French**. Up to the thirteenth century these borrowings were rather few and reflected the role of French as the language of the ruling class (cf. PDE JUSTICE, OBEDIENCE, MASTERY, PRISON, SERVICE, all of which are first found in English during the early ME period). Most of these words were adopted from Norman French, sometimes demonstrated by the distinctive form of the adopted word in PDE compared with its Present-Day French cognate, e.g. WAR (ME and Norman French *werre*): Present-Day French *guerre*, CARPENTER (ME and Norman French *carpenter*): Present-Day French *charpentier*. However, after that date, French words from the Central French dialects enter the language at a great rate, reflecting the cultural status of Central France; it seems to have become customary for the higher social classes in England to signal their class-membership by studding their English with French-derived vocabulary. Chaucer's

lexicon is rich with words derived from French, e.g. *honour*, *chivalrie*, *curteisie*, *compaignye*, *tendre* – all of which have survived barely changed into PDE.

5.2 Word-formation

More subtly, French usages were also adopted to augment patterns of English word-formation, e.g. the extension of the French adjectival suffix to words with native English roots such as KNOWABLE, UNSPEAKABLE. However, an alternative to compounding now existed, viz. borrowing, and it is noticeable that borrowed words were used in place of some OE compound words, e.g. *abrecan* destroy (cf. Old French *destruire*), *forbǫrnan* consume (cf. Latin *consumere*, possibly borrowed via Old French *consumer*).

5.3 Changes of meaning

There were some changes of meaning between OE and ME, largely to do with the reorganisation of the lexicon consequent upon words being borrowed from French; thus *mood* in Chaucerian English is closer in meaning to that of PDE MOOD, since an older meaning had been taken over by a French loanword, viz. SPIRIT. It seems that, as French words were borrowed into English, they took over some of the semantic 'slots' hitherto occupied by native words, and there are numerous other examples of the process, e.g. OE *smierwan* SMEAR meant ANOINT, SALVE, SMEAR; when the French loan *anoynten* ANOINT (cf. Old French *enoint*) was adopted, ME *smeren* SMEAR developed its PDE connotations of crudeness.

6. On Middle English dialects

For reasons given above, ME is the period when dialect-variation is most fully expressed in the written mode. Some awareness of dialectal usages is essential to a proper understanding of ME structure, even though advanced dialectological analysis is a comparatively complex matter.

ME dialects have been traditionally categorised as follows: Northern (including Lowland Scotland), East Midland (including London), West Midland and Southern, with distinctively Scots, East Anglian and Kentish sub-dialects. However, closer study soon reveals that these groupings are extremely general typological notions, and that in reality the ME materials present us with a dialect continuum, rather like that of PDE spoken dialects.

Bearing this fact in mind, it is nevertheless possible to present an extremely rough characterisation of the five groupings. Only a few criteria, diagnostic in collocation, have been chosen to illustrate each dialect-region, and it should be emphasised that this is a highly simplified sketch.

Anyone interested in pursuing matters further is strongly urged to consult the standard work on Middle English dialectology, A. McIntosh, M.L. Samuels and M. Benskin eds., *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986), especially the General Introduction to Volume I; see also M. Laing ed., *Middle English Dialectology* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988) for a collection of classic essays.

Northern

(1) *a*-spellings for OE *ā*, e.g. *stane* STONE, beside *stoon*, etc. in other dialects

(2) *ui*, *uCe*-spellings for OE *ō*, e.g. *guid/gude* GOOD, beside *go(d)(e)* in other dialects

(3) *-es/-is* type inflexions for both 3rd person present singular and present plural of verbs, e.g. *standis* STANDS

(4) *-and* as the present participle inflexion

(5) *scho* for PDE SHE

(6) Early occurrence of *th*-type 3rd person plural pronouns in all cases, e.g., *thay*, *thaim*, *thair*

(7) Early loss of weak/strong adjective distinction, e.g. *the strang strif* THE VIOLENT STRUGGLE, *the strif is strang*

(8) Distinctively northern vocabulary, with a high level of borrowing from Norse, e.g. *til* TO, *fra* FROM

(9) *y* and *þ* are written identically, as *y*

(10) Scots texts form a distinctive sub-group, becoming more distinctive as the fifteenth century progresses. Characteristic features include *quh-* for PDE WH- in words such as WHAT, WHO, WHICH (*quhat*, *quha*, *quhilk*), etc.

West Midland

(1) *o*-spellings for OE *a* when followed by a nasal, e.g. *mon* MAN, beside *man* etc. in other dialects

(2) *u, uy*-spellings for OE *y*, e.g. *fuyr* FIRE

(3) *e*-spellings for WS Q in *dei* DAY (cf. WS *dæg*), etc.

(4) In verbal inflexion, *-eth* for 3rd present singular, *-e(n)* for present plural.

(5) Retention of *eo*-spelling in words like *(s)heo* SHE

(6) Retention of weak/strong adjective distinction, e.g. *the longe wey*, *the wey is long*

East Midland

(1) *a* for OE *a* + nasal and WS *æ*, and *i, y* for OE *y*: *man*, *day*, *fir(e)*

(2) *o(o)* for OE *ā*, e.g. *stoon*

(3) In verbal inflexion, *-eth*, etc. for third person present singular, *-e(n)* for present plural.

(4) Mixture of native and borrowed forms in 3rd person plural paradigm is characteristic, i.e. *they, hem, her(e)*, etc.

(5) Present participle in *-ing(e)* etc., past participle in *-en* in words such as *bounden*. Some East Anglian texts have *-and(e)* as the present participle inflexion, as in northern dialects, and this form also occurs in certain mid-fourteenth-century London texts.

(6) Retention of weak/strong adjective distinction

(7) East Anglian texts form a distinctive sub-group, with (e.g.) *x-* for PDE SH- in words like *xal* SHALL, *xulde* SHOULD etc., and *qu-* for WH- in *quan* WHEN, etc.

Southern

(1) *v* for initial *f* in OE, e.g. *vox* FOX. (*z* is found initially for *s* in a few south-eastern ME texts in *zunne* SUN, etc. It is likely that in southern varieties of ME initial *s* was generally pronounced voiced.)

(2) In South-Western, *u, uy* for OE *y*; in Kentish, *e* is much more common as the reflex of OE *y* – thus Kentish *zenne* SIN, OE *synne*

(3) Conservative verbal inflexion: *-th* for third present singular (e.g. *comth* COMES), *-eth*, etc. for present plural.

(4) Past participle commonly with *y-* prefix, e.g. *ybounde*

(5) Retention of weak/strong adjective distinction

(6) Overall, Southern English dialects are conservative in inflectional patterns, with, e.g. retention of grammatical gender until the mid-fourteenth century (see also (3)–(5) above).

The above features are only representative sets of dialectally distinctive forms, and the lists of forms could of course have been greatly extended.

[END]