

FOURTH EDITION

A BOOK OF
**MIDDLE
ENGLISH**

THORLAC TURVILLE-PETRE
J. A. BURROW



WILEY Blackwell

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and
J. A. Burrow[†]

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This book is dedicated to the memory of J. A. Burrow

Preface to the Fourth Edition

This book is a companion to Mitchell and Robinson's *Guide to Old English*. It contains representative pieces of English writing from the period *c.*1150–*c.*1400. We have included examples of romance, battle poetry, chronicle, biblical narrative, debate, dialogue, dream vision, religious and mystical prose, miracle story, fabliau, lyric poetry and drama. Although the choice of pieces has been determined by literary considerations, the general introduction concentrates on matters of language. We have attempted, in this introduction, to give readers only such information about the language as we consider essential for the proper understanding and appreciation of the texts. Since these texts exhibit many varieties of Middle English, from different periods and regions, our account is inevitably selective and somewhat simplified. For further reading on the language, and also on the history and literature of the period, the reader is referred to the Bibliography.

The headnote to each text provides a brief introduction, together with a short reading list. Annotations and Glossary are both quite full; but, for reasons of space, explanations given in notes at the foot of the page are not duplicated in the Glossary.

The fourth edition has been revised throughout. It includes a new Chapter 8, 'Translating Middle English', and a new text, Chapter 19 'Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*'.

Our debts to earlier editors will be evident throughout. We are particularly grateful to Ronald Waldron for allowing us to use his work on the Trevisa (text 12). Hanneke Wirtjes kindly read Part One and suggested improvements. We received advice from the Custodian of Berkeley Castle, Richard Beadle, Erin Connolly, Alison McHardy, Joanna Martin, Jeremy Smith, Michael Smith, Timothy Stinson and his students, Myra Stokes, and Anthony Tuck. For help with the etymological entries in the Glossary we owe a great debt to David A. H. Evans. We are also grateful to the libraries which granted us access to their manuscripts, to Aberdeen University Press for permission to reproduce the maps on p. 16, to the many colleagues who responded to the questionnaire originally sent out by the publishers, and to several reviewers and correspondents who suggested improvements. I dedicate this edition to the memory of J. A. Burrow.

T.T.-P.

Abbreviations

AV	Authorized Version of the Bible
Bede, <i>History</i>	<i>Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> , ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969)
Chaucer	References are to <i>The Riverside Chaucer</i> , ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987; Oxford, 1988)
EETS	Early English Text Society (e.s. = extra series)
<i>Guide to Old English</i>	Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, <i>A Guide to Old English</i> (6th edn, Oxford, 2001)
<i>Linguistic Atlas</i>	A. McIntosh, M. L. Samuels and M. Benskin, <i>A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English</i> (Aberdeen, 1986)
ME	Middle English
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
OE	Old English
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
ON	Old Norse
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne
Trevisa, <i>Properties</i>	<i>On the Properties of Things. John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomæus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum</i> (Oxford, 1975)
Vulgate	References are to the Douai translation of the Latin Vulgate Bible (see 12/92n.)
Whiting	B. J. Whiting and H. W. Whiting, <i>Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500</i> (Cambridge, Mass., 1968)

Abbreviations of grammatical terms are listed in the Headnote to the Glossary.

Part One

1

Introducing Middle English

1.1 THE PERIOD

The term ‘Middle English’ has its origins in nineteenth-century studies of the history of the English language. German philologists then divided the history into three main periods: Old (*alt-*), Middle (*mittel-*), and New or Modern (*neu-*). Middle English is commonly held to begin about 1100–50 and end about 1450–1500. Unlike periods in political history, many of which can be dated quite precisely if need be (by a change of monarch or dynasty or regime), linguistic periods can be defined only loosely. Languages change all the time in all their aspects – vocabulary, pronunciation, grammatical forms, syntax, etc. – and it is impossible to decide exactly when such changes add up to something worth calling a new period. Yet, for all this lack of precision, it seems clear that the language of a mid-twelfth-century writing such as our extract from the *Peterborough Chronicle* (text 1) differs sufficiently from Old English to count as belonging to a new period.

1.1.1 From Old to Middle English

The Old English described in our companion volume, Mitchell and Robinson’s *Guide to Old English*, is based on the language of the West-Saxon kingdom as it was written in the days of King Alfred of Wessex (d. 899). It was the English of this part of the country which, in the last century before the Norman Conquest in 1066, came to be accepted as the standard written form of English. People went on talking in their own various dialects; but most of the English writings set down at this time (including most Old English poetry and prose known to us) conform to this Late West-Saxon standard language. As is usually the case with such standards, this written English owed its predominance to a political fact: the predominance of Wessex itself under King Alfred and his successors over the other old kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England. But after 1066, Wessex became no more than one, rather remote, part of a French-speaking king’s realm; and the language

of Wessex accordingly lost its special status too, ending up eventually as just another form of written Middle English: 'South-Western'. This development goes a long way to explain why most writings of the twelfth century present such a different appearance from those of the tenth or eleventh. The language as spoken had, of course, changed in the interval, but the nature of our written evidence for it changed more drastically. Twelfth-century scribes, unlike their Anglo-Saxon predecessors, customarily employed whichever form of English they or their authors happened to use. Hence they represent in their writings changes which had already occurred in the spoken language of late Old English, but which had left no more than occasional traces in the writings of that period. For it is the nature of standard forms of language to be fixed and therefore conservative in the face of linguistic change. Three features particularly distinguish Middle from Old English:

(i) A much simpler system of inflexions, especially in nouns and adjectives. A major cause of this simplification was the tendency to blur the distinction between vowel-sounds in the unstressed syllables of words, reducing most of them to /ə/, the sound heard in the unstressed, second syllable of the modern word 'China'. Since inflexional endings were regularly unstressed, this tendency obliterated many distinctions between them, e.g. between Old English *stānes* (genitive singular of the masculine noun *stān*, 'stone') and *stānas* (nominative and accusative plural). An associated change was the eventual loss in all Middle English dialects of 'grammatical gender' in nouns and adjectives, since the division of these into masculine, feminine and neuter in Old English had depended upon inflexional distinctions most of which failed to survive. (On inflexions generally, see chapter 4 below.)

(ii) Increased reliance upon word-order and prepositions to mark the relationships of words in a sentence. This change also goes along with the simplification of inflexions. In many singular nouns, for instance, Old English had distinguished the nominative (subject) form from the accusative (object) form. Where that distinction was lost, as in Middle English generally, it was only word-order that could distinguish the subject of a verb from its object. (On Middle English syntax, see chapter 5 below.)

(iii) An increasingly more 'mixed' vocabulary. English is in its origin a Germanic language. The vocabulary of Old English had relatively few words from other sources (though there were significant borrowings from the Latin of the Church). By contrast, Middle English draws heavily on French and Latin, and also on the languages of the Scandinavian settlers who had populated large areas of England (but not Wessex) in the later Anglo-Saxon period. (On Middle English vocabulary, see chapter 3 below.)

1.1.2 From Middle to Modern English

Our anthology of prose and verse is mainly confined, for purely practical reasons, to writings before 1400; but historians of the language commonly hold the Middle English period to have extended for as much as a century

after that date, placing its end at about 1450–1500. This dating evidently owes a good deal to non-linguistic considerations (the coming of the Tudors in 1485, or even ‘the waning of the Middle Ages’), and it is not easy to justify from a strictly linguistic point of view. But two factors may be singled out:

(i) The Great Vowel Shift. This complex set of changes in the pronunciation of English long vowels serves more than anything else to explain the differences between Chaucer’s pronunciation and our own (see below, 2.2.1). Yet these changes occurred over a long period of time and were by no means complete by 1500.

(ii) The rise of Modern Standard English. The history of this familiar form of the written (not spoken) language properly begins about 1430, with the so-called ‘Chancery Standard’ employed by bureaucrats in Westminster and elsewhere. The advent of printing in 1473 or 1474, when William Caxton first printed a book in English, eventually served to confirm the national standing of that form of English. The Middle English period may therefore be said to have ended with the establishment of a new national written standard, just as it may be said to have begun with the disestablishment of an old one (1.1.1 above).

1.2 VARIETIES OF MIDDLE ENGLISH

The absence of a nationally recognized standard of written English in the period unfortunately presents readers of Middle English literature with problems of linguistic diversity much greater than those encountered in the reading of post-medieval texts – or indeed Old English ones. Geoffrey Chaucer complained of the ‘gret diversité / In Englishsh and in wrytyng of oure tonge’ (*Troilus* 5.1793–4). This complaint makes a necessary distinction, between ‘Englishsh’ and the ‘wrytyng’ of it. Any language spoken by many people for any length of time will naturally exhibit ‘gret diversité’: usage will vary from place to place, time to time, occupation to occupation, individual to individual. The function of a fixed written standard is to mask such variations in so far as they interfere with communication across barriers of place, time, etc. It is the absence of such a generally accepted standard in Middle English which leads to the ‘gret diversité in *wrytyng* of oure tonge’ observed by Chaucer.

1.2.1 Regional Dialects

The main source of diversity in written Middle English is regional and local variation. Spoken English has always been diversified in this way and still is today; but literary texts outside the Middle English period rarely exhibit any regional forms other than those represented in the written standards observed by authors, scribes or printers. By contrast, authors in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries generally wrote the English that they spoke – whether in London, Hereford, Peterborough, or York – and the scribes who copied their work either preserved that language or else more or less consistently substituted their own, equally local, forms.

There are several different ways of classifying the many regional varieties of Middle English. The simplest is to distinguish, as John Trevisa did in the fourteenth century, between ‘Southeron, Northeron, and Myddel speche’. Modern scholars commonly make further distinctions, at least for the Southern and Midland areas, which are more fully represented in surviving texts than the Northern. Thus, in our own map (p. 7), we distinguish South-Eastern from South-Western, and West Midland from East Midland. Further refinements are of course possible; but even these bear only a rough-and-ready relation to realities. To describe a regional dialect is to specify certain features which are held to be characteristic of its vocabulary, idiom, spelling, grammatical forms, sounds, etc. But if you take such features and map them individually according to their occurrence in localizable texts, as has been done for many in the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (see Bibliography, 9.2, and map p. 16 here), two awkward facts emerge. First, an individual dialect feature – say, a locally characteristic word – will not normally be separated off from its neighbouring alternatives by a clear boundary. Second, such boundaries as can be drawn, albeit roughly, for individual features – the so-called ‘isoglosses’ – will not commonly coincide or bundle together with one another in such a way as to define a single firm and satisfactory dialect boundary. Rather, what one finds is a ‘complex of overlapping distributions’ (*Linguistic Atlas* I 4).

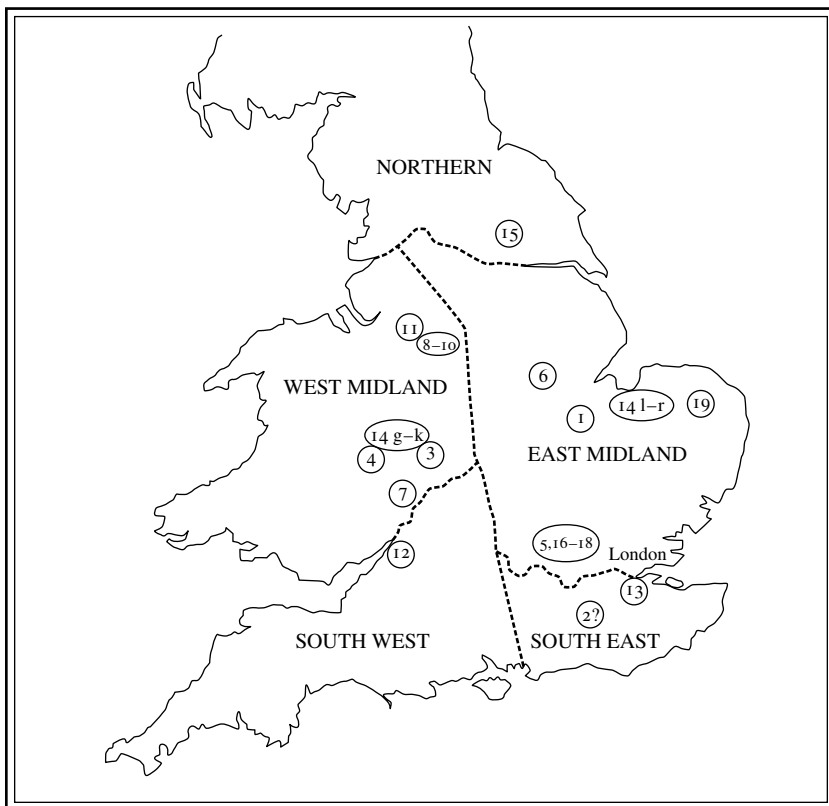
Something of the range of dialect variation in Middle English may be gathered from text 18a, the Reeve’s Tale. Here Chaucer, himself a Londoner, imitates the speech of two students from ‘fer in the north’ – probably Northumberland, and therefore well north of the northernmost of our texts (no. 15). He notices three main types of feature:

Phonological: especially the Northern preservation of Old English (and Scandinavian) /a:/ in words where London English had an ‘open o’, /ɔ:/ (see 2.2.1 below). Thus: *bathe, tma, wha*, when Chaucer normally has *bothe, two, who*.

Inflexional: especially the *-(e)s* ending for the third person present indicative of verbs (see 4.5.2 below). Thus: *he fyndes, he brynges*. This Northern and North Midland form later spread south and superseded Southern *-eth*, which was Chaucer’s usual form. Hence it is the students’ form, not Chaucer’s, which will in this case appear ‘normal’ to the modern reader.

Lexical: words and meanings alien to London English. Thus: the words *heythen*, ‘hence’, and *ille*, ‘bad’; and *hope* in the sense ‘expect’. Many of these are of Scandinavian origin (see 3.2 below).

The dialect areas of Middle English cannot be at all precisely mapped, as one can map a county. It remains possible, of course, to describe this or that feature as broadly characteristic of this or that area; and later sections of this introduction will touch on some regional variations in inflexions and vocabulary. But the introduction will mostly be concerned with outlining the general features of Middle English, leaving peculiarities of individual texts to be briefly treated in their respective headnotes.



- 1 *The Peterborough Chronicle*
- 2 *The Owl and the Nightingale*
- 3 *Lazamon's Brut*
- 4 *Ancrene Wisse*
- 5 *Sir Orfeo*
- 6 *The Cloud of Unknowing*
- 7 Lancelot: *Piers Plowman*
- 8 *Patience*
- 9 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- 10 *Pearl*
- 11 *St Erkenwald*
- 12 Trevisa: *Dialogue between a Lord and a Clerk*
- 13 Gower: *Confessio Amantis*
- 14 Lyrics
- 15 The York Play of the Crucifixion
- 16 Chaucer: *The Parliament of Fowls*
- 17 Chaucer: *Troilus and Criseyde*
- 18 Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales*
- 19 Julian of Norwich: *Revelations of Divine Love*

The dialects of Middle English. The mappings of the texts are approximate. They represent the dialects of the texts as printed here from scribal copies, which may differ from the author's own regional form of English. For further details see the individual headnotes, and for comments on 'dialect boundaries' see 1.2.1.

1.2.2 Early and Late Middle English

It would be wrong to leave the impression that the ‘gret diversité’ of written Middle English is solely a matter of regional variation. There is variation over time as well as over space. The texts represented in this book span a period of about 250 years, and even in the Middle Ages 250 years was a long time. Our selection opens with a group of Early Middle English writings by twelfth- and early thirteenth-century poets and prose writers whose language would have appeared distinctly archaic to their fourteenth-century successors. *Lazamon* and *Langland* both belonged to the same South-West Midland dialect area; but *Langland* would have found much that was strange in the vocabulary and inflexions of *Lazamon*’s *Brut*, had he known it.

1.2.3 Spelling

One further source of diversity remains to be mentioned. The absence of a national written standard means that, even where differences of spoken form are not in question, the same word may be spelled in a variety of different ways. The writing of Middle English was by no means an uncontrolled or anarchic activity; and in some cases the usage of a scribe can be shown to be quite strictly determined by a local school of practice, such as that in which the writer of *Ancrene Wisse* (text no. 4 here) was evidently trained. But the usage of such ‘schools’ prevailed only in specific areas and for limited periods of time; and in general one has to be prepared for a good deal of inconsistency in scribal spellings. The evidence for this may be found in our Glossary, where we have frequently had to cross-refer from one form of a word to another.

2

Pronouncing Middle English

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Although the scribes who copied our texts wrote Middle English in a variety of differing forms, their spelling generally keeps closer to the sounds of words than does that of Modern English. Modern English spelling, largely fixed by the usage of early printers, has in many words preserved letters which no longer correspond to anything in the changed spoken language – as in ‘knight’, for instance. Middle English spelling, being more fluid, was better able to adapt to changes in pronunciation as they occurred. None of the spelling systems represented in this book can be called ‘phonetic’, in the sense of having one and only one written symbol for each sound; but there are relatively few words in which a letter (like *k* in modern ‘knight’) has no corresponding sound in the spoken form.

It is always desirable to have some idea of how poetry should sound; but in the case of Middle English writings – prose as well as verse – there are particular reasons for trying to hear as well as see them. In an age when written copies were still relatively scarce, texts were often transmitted by reading them aloud to a listener or group: in his *Troilus*, Chaucer describes Criseyde sitting with two other ladies in her parlour listening to a maiden reading aloud from a book (17/81–4). Even solitary readers commonly murmured as they read. The kind of speed-reading which leaps straight from the printed form of a word to its meaning was rarely possible in an age of manuscript, where handwritings and spellings varied from copy to copy. Hence medieval texts make bold use of effects designed to strike the ear – rhymes, alliterations, rhythmical parallels, and the like.

What follows is no more than a rough guide, to enable readers to produce or imagine approximately the right sounds. These are indicated between slashes (/ /). Where modern equivalents are given, these are drawn from standard British English (RP, ‘Received Pronunciation’). For fuller accounts of Middle English phonology, see Blake (1992) and Jordan in Bibliography 9.2 below.

2.2 VOWELS

2.2.1 The Long Vowels

The main system of long vowel sounds in Middle English was as follows (a colon indicates length):

- /a:/ as in modern ‘father’
- /ɛ:/ as in French ‘bête’ (‘open *e*’, roughly as in modern ‘there’)
- /e:/ as in French ‘thé’ (‘close *e*’, roughly as in modern ‘say’)
- /i:/ as in modern ‘see’
- /ɔ:/ roughly as in modern ‘broad’ (‘open *o*’)
- /o:/ as in French ‘eau’ (‘close *o*’, roughly as in modern ‘go’)
- /u:/ as in modern ‘do’

The following Middle English words illustrate typical ways of representing these sounds:

- save* and *caas* (modern ‘case’) have /a:/'
- lene*, *heeth* and *death* commonly have /ɛ:/'
- nede* and *sweete* have /e:/'
- fine* and *shyne* have /i:/'
- holy* and *oon* (modern ‘one’) have /ɔ:/'
- foot* and *mone* (modern ‘moon’) have /o:/'
- hous* and *lowde* have /u:/'

Three observations may be added. The long open *e*, /ɛ:/', was unstable: words such as *lene* commonly have variants with the long close vowel, /e:/'. Secondly, neither the distinction between open and close long *e* nor that between open and close long *o* is regularly marked by Middle English spelling. Modern spellings are a better guide, in cases where the word survives. Thus *-ee-* and *-oo-* in modern words (e.g. ‘feet’, ‘moon’) frequently indicate a close vowel in the Middle English word. Similarly, *-ea-* and *-oa-* in modern words (e.g. ‘heath’, ‘boat’) frequently indicate earlier open vowels. Finally, it should be noted that two of our early texts, nos 1 and 3, employ the Old English vowel symbol *æ* (known as ‘ash’), most often for /ɛ:/', but also for /a:/'.

It will be seen that in Middle English spellings the letters *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*, when they represent long vowels, have values very different from those in Modern English. But it is Modern English which is out of line here. Middle English scribes followed Latin usage (going back to the time when Anglo-Saxon was first written in the Latin alphabet) and also, to a lesser extent, French. This is the usage which still prevails in the writing of French and other continental languages. English is now ‘out of line’ as a result of a series of changes which affected all the English sounds in question during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the so-called Great Vowel Shift.

Thus, Middle English /a:/ shifted to /e:/; but the words in which it occurred ('case', 'name' etc.) preserved their old *a* spelling. Similar changes affected the sounds but not the spellings of the other Middle English long vowels. So, by the eighteenth century:

- /a:/ became /e:/ and later the diphthong /ei/ (modern 'name')
- /ɛ:/ became either /e:/ (modern 'break') or more often /i:/ (modern 'heath')
- /e:/ became /i:/ (modern 'see')
- /i:/ became the diphthong /ai/ (modern 'time')
- /ɔ:/ became /o:/ (modern 'boat')
- /o:/ became /u:/ (modern 'moon')
- /u:/ became the diphthong /au/ (modern 'house')

2.2.2 The Short Vowels

The letters *e* and *i* or *y*, where they represent short vowels in words such as Middle English *hell*, *pit* or *synne*, are to be pronounced as in Modern English. The letter *a* is always to be pronounced /a/ as in French 'patte', not as in the modern 'cat' (in Received Pronunciation). The letter *æ* (in nos 1 and 3 only), where it represents a short vowel, signifies either /a/ or /e/. The letter *u* is always to be pronounced /u/ as in modern 'put', even in words whose modern descendants have the sound of 'cut'; but where the modern descendant has an *e* or *i* (as in 'merry' for the Western Middle English *murie*, or 'kin' for Western *kunne*), the *u* is to be pronounced as in French 'du'. The letter *o* is normally much as in Modern English 'God'; but it also acts as a spelling for /u/ in words such as *yong* or *love* (where modern usage commonly offers a guide).

2.2.3 Unstressed Final -e

In the spelling of modern words such as 'name', 'fine' and 'nice', the final letter *-e* serves to define the sound of the previous vowel and often also that of the intervening consonant. In Middle English spelling, however, it had a more straightforward function: to indicate a final *e* sound. Sometimes it represents the sound /e:/, in which case it is distinguished in this book by an acute accent (*pité*, pronounced /pite:/). But its main function was to represent the unstressed final /ə/, as in the second syllable of modern 'China'. Thus, in the poetry of Gower, a word such as *name* will have two syllables, /na:mə/, except where the final vowel is lost before a following word which begins with a vowel or some kinds of *h-* (see 6.2 below). There was, however, a tendency for /ə/ to be lost in such unstressed positions, especially in more northerly dialects. Hence the rhymes of the *Gawain*-poet indicate a northerly usage varying between pronounced and silent final *-e*: compare the rhymes in 9/176, 178 and 9/413, 415 here.

2.2.4 The Diphthongs

One may start with the assumption that, in Middle English spelling, combinations of vowel-letters such as *ai* or *au* represent (as they rarely do in modern spelling) sequences which begin with the sound indicated by the first letter and end with the sound indicated by the second. Thus, Middle English *day* was pronounced with /a/ + /i/, as a single syllable, much like modern ‘die’; and Middle English *cause* has the diphthong of modern ‘cow’, /a/ + /u/. Similarly, *eu* or *ew* represent an *e* sound followed by /u/, which is also as it should be. But note the following:

- (i) *ei* originally represented /e/ + /i/; but this diphthong developed into /a/ + /i/ in the thirteenth century. So *alwey* rhymes with *may* thereafter.
- (ii) *oi* commonly represented /o/ + /i/, but also sometimes /u/ + /i/. The two diphthongs occur as alternatives in certain words, e.g. *boy*.
- (iii) *ou* or *ow* represented /o/ + /u/ in such words as *foughten*; but in words now pronounced with /au/, like ‘house’, they represented /u:/. (See 2.2.1 above.)
- (iv) *ea* and *eo* spellings do not represent diphthongs in Middle English, though they had done so in Old English. In each case, the Old English diphthong has become a single vowel sound in Middle English, while retaining the two-letter spelling. So Middle English *ea* represents /ɛ:/; and *eo* represents /e/ when short, and /e:/ when long. In Early Middle English writings of Western origin such as *Lazamon’s Brut* or *Ancrene Wisse* (texts 3 and 4 here), however, *eo* is to be pronounced like the vowel in French ‘people’ (short or long).

2.3 CONSONANTS

We have already seen how, in the post-medieval period, the spelling of vowels failed to keep pace with changes in the sounds themselves (2.2.1 above). The spoken language went on changing, but the written or printed language assumed a standardized, and therefore largely unchanging, set of forms. The result, so far as consonants are concerned, is that modern spelling persists in recording sounds which have long since ceased to be pronounced at all. Examples are the initial letters in modern ‘gnaw’, ‘knot’ and ‘wring’; the final letters in ‘damn’ and ‘comb’; and the medial letters of ‘would’ and (in most pronunciations) ‘night’. It can safely be assumed that letters such as these are to be pronounced whenever they occur in medieval spellings. Thus, Middle English *gnawen* begins with /g/ – as one might, after all, expect.

Middle English scribes, as represented in this book, employed three consonant symbols unfamiliar to the modern reader. These are: δ (known as ‘eth’), β (‘thorn’), and γ (‘yogh’). Of these, the first two both represent what would now be called ‘*th* sounds’, without distinguishing in either case between the initial sounds of ‘thin’ and ‘this’. ‘Eth’ is the Latin *d* with a cross-stroke, hence *D* in its capital form. This went out of fashion earlier than ‘thorn’, a letter borrowed by Anglo-Saxon scribes from the runic alphabet. In some areas the letter β became indistinguishable from γ : hence the use of γ for *th* in ‘Ye Olde Teashoppe’. This confusion no doubt contributed to the general adoption of the two-letter spelling *th* after 1400. ‘Yogh’ (γ) is simply the descendant of the Anglo-Saxon letter-form for *g*, which Middle English scribes retained alongside the ancestor of the modern form of *g*. They tended to use modern *g* for the stop consonant as in ‘good’, reserving γ for other purposes. It corresponds to modern consonantal *y* in words such as *zong*, ‘young’, and to modern *gh* in words such as *riȝt*, ‘right’. In the latter case, γ represents sounds heard in Scots ‘licht’ and ‘loch’.

The adoption of *th* for β and of *gh* for γ in later Middle English contributed to the establishment of a set of modern two-letter spellings for single consonant sounds, where *h* is regularly the second, differentiating letter. Thus: *ch*, *gh*, *sh*, *th*. This pattern not being yet established in Middle English, ‘child’ may be spelt *cild*, ‘shall’ may be *shal*.

2.4 STRESS

The main rule governing word-stress in Middle English is to place the primary stress on a word’s first syllable unless that syllable is an unstressable prefix. Thus: *wildernes*, *kingdom*; but *uncoûþ*, *bihýnden*. Since this is also modern English practice, the reader will encounter no difficulty with most words.

Stressing on the first syllable was a general rule in Germanic languages, which therefore governed Scandinavian borrowings in Middle English as well as native words. The rule in medieval French, however, was almost the exact opposite: to stress a word on the heavy syllable closest to the *end* of the word (so not, for example, on an unstressable final /ə/). English has borrowed many words from French, and in most cases these now conform to the Germanic rule; but in Middle English such words commonly vary between French and native stressing – thus, *natúre* beside *nature*. Mossé, in his *Handbook of Middle English*, illustrates this with a line of Chaucer’s: ‘In *dívers art and in díverse figures*’.

Middle English words of two or more syllables have, more frequently than in Modern English, a secondary as well as a primary stress. Thus Gower can rhyme *lye* with *avánterie* (13/39, 40) and *springe* with *knówleçhinge* (13/15, 16).

3

Vocabulary

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The vocabulary of Middle English is considerably more varied in its origins than that of Old English (see above, 1.1.1 (iii)). This variety has two main causes: the influence of Scandinavian languages, and the combined influences of Latin and its vernacular derivative, French. These influences operated in different ways. French or Latin words might be adopted or ‘borrowed’ wherever English people used those languages, which could be anywhere in the country; but Scandinavian loan-words appeared at first only in those northern and eastern regions where Danish or Norwegian was spoken. Although many such borrowings from Scandinavia eventually came into general use, they had, to begin with, a distinctively regional distribution.

3.2 SCANDINAVIAN

Scandinavian or ‘Viking’ raids on Anglo-Saxon England led to settlements whose southern and western limit was defined roughly by a line drawn from London to Chester in a treaty of about 886. To the north and east of this line lay the Danelaw. Large parts of this area were settled by the immigrants, as is still shown by place-names with Scandinavian elements such as ‘-by’ and ‘-thorpe’ (Grimsby in Lincolnshire, Milnthorpe in Cumbria). In these circumstances, Scandinavian words naturally found their way into the speech of the native English who came into contact with the settlers, and also into the speech of the settlers themselves as they came to abandon their own Danish or Norwegian and speak the language of their adopted country – a process evidently complete by the twelfth century.

Many such Scandinavian loan-words have continued throughout their career in English to be regional or ‘dialect’ words. Thus the borrowing from Danish, *kay* meaning ‘left’ (*Sir Gawain*, 9/422 here), survived as a Cheshire dialect word into modern times, but never achieved general currency.