

Middle English

ME 1150-1500

Most important writer: **Chaucer 1343-1400**

Chaucer primary influence on ModE

sought to raise vernacular to literary language (Dante)

wide range of genres and styles: lyric, narrative poetry; prose;

translations; romances, legends, ribald tales

included “low” characters, “rude” speech

iambic pentameter, rhyme, heroic couplets

many early editions from Caxton (1476) on

London Standard ME as direct ancestor of ModE

(recall: OE was based on West Saxon)

ME form in Chaucer is generally quite close to ModE form

(though not so for other ME writers and dialects)

and pronunciation derivable via Great Vowel Shift

and a few other regular correspondences

SPELLING

for Chaucer in most editions no new letters

though some letters have different values

Consonants

r = apical trill

wh = aspirated [hw]

gh = [ç, x]

g as in French before **e**, **i** as in **engendred**, **courage**

still pronounced: **kn gn** and **wr**

and **l** before **f**, **v** and **m** and **k** as in **half**, **calve**, **palmer**,
folk

Vowels

<i>Sound</i>	<i>Spelling</i>	<i>Example</i>
[ɑ]	a	what
[ɑ:]	a, aa	fader, caas
[ɛ]	e	hem
[ɛ:]	e, ee	bere, heeth
[e:]	e, ee	swete, neede
[ɪ]	i, y	list, nyste
[i:]	i, y	blithe, nyce
[ɔ]	o	for
[ɔ:]	o, oo	lore, goon
[o:]	o, oo	dom, roote
[ʊ]	u, o	ful, nonne
[u:]	ou, ow	hous, how
[y]	u	vertu
[ə]	e	yonge
[aʊ]	au, aw	cause, drawe
[ɛɪ]	ai, ay, ei, ey	fair, may, feith, eyr
[ɛʊ]	ew	fewe, shewe
[ɪʊ]	eu, ew	reule, newe
[oʊ]	ou, ow	thought, knowe
[ɔɪ]	oi, oy	point, joye

Cable p. 59

Norman French scribal tradition in **ou, ow** for long [u] and [u] for [y]

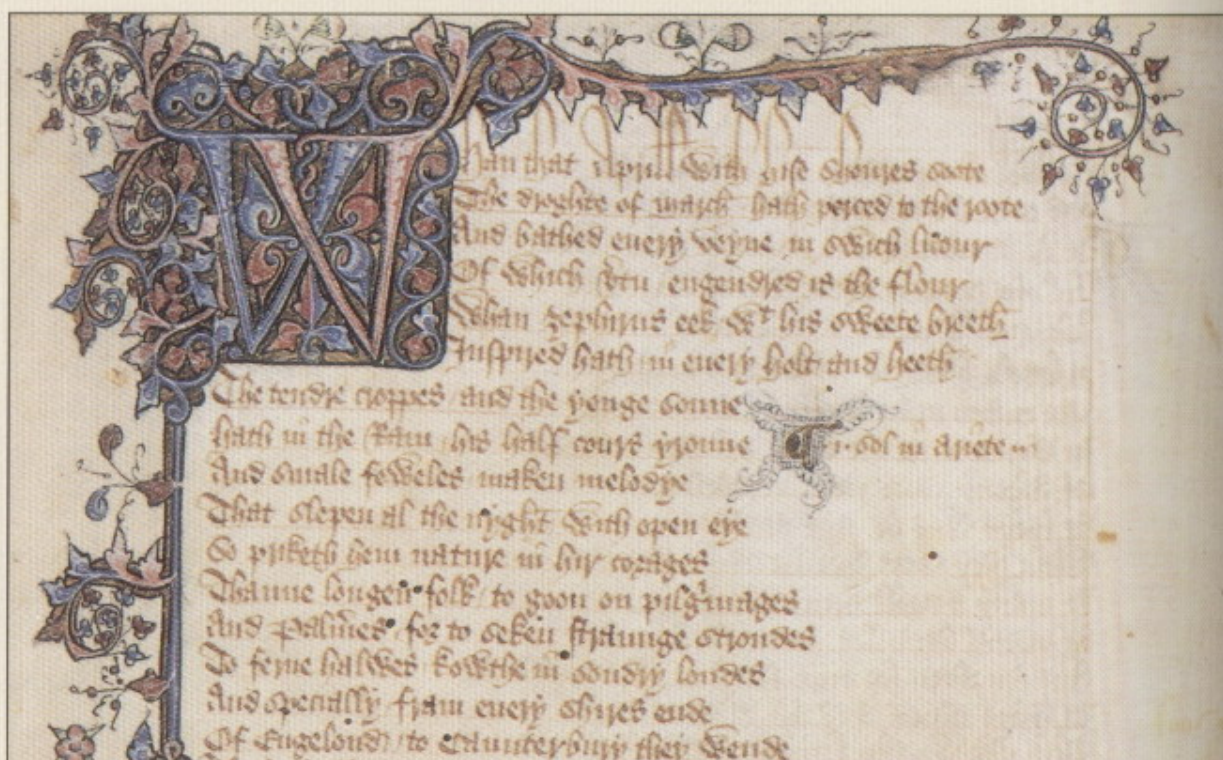
Also use of **o** for retracted [u] in e.g. **nonne, sonne, love, yronne**

Both **i** and **y** for both long and short [i] in **byte/bite, ywis/iwis**

Distinguish open and close long **o** as in **stone/stoon** vs. **rote/root**

by reference to OE **stan** vs. **rot** or ModE **o** vs. **u** pronunciation

Distinguish open and close long [e] as in **swete/sweet** vs. **breeth**
by reference to ModE spelling **ee** vs. **ea**



Whan that Aprille with hise shoures soote
When April with its sweet showers
'hwan θat 'a:prɪl, wɪθ hɪs 'ʃu:ɹəs 'so:ɪtə

The droghte of March hath perced to the
roote

has pierced the drought of March to the root
θə 'drɔxt ɔf 'mɑ:ʃ hɑθ 'pɜ:səd, tɔ: ðə 'rɔ:tə

And bathed every veyne in swich licour
and bathed every vein in such liquid
and 'bɑ:ðəd 'e:vri 'væɪn ɪn 'swɪʃ lɪ'ku:ɹ

Of which vertu engendred is the flour
from which strength the flower is
engendered;

ɔf 'hwɪʃ vɜ:tɪu ɛn'dʒɛndrəd, ɪs θə 'flaʊ

5 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
When Zephirus also with his sweet breath
hwan, zɛfɪ'rus e:k, wɪθ hɪs 'swe:tə 'bre:θ

Inspired hath in euery holt and heeth
has breathed upon in every woodland and
heath

ɪn'spɪrəd 'hɑθ ɪn 'e:vri 'hɔlt and 'he:θ

The tendre croppes and the yonge sonne
the tender shoots, and the young sun
θə 'tɛndər 'krɒppəs, and ðə 'jʊŋgə 'sʊnnə

Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne
has run his half-course in the Ram,
'hɑθ ɪn ðə 'rɑm hɪs 'hɑlf 'kɔ:rs ɪ'rɒnnə

And smale fowles maken melodye
and small birds make melody
and 'sma:lə 'fu:ləs 'ma:kən mɛlə'di:ə

10 That slepen al the nyght with open eye
that sleep all night with open eye
θat 'sle:pən 'a:l ðə 'niçt wɪθ 'ɔ:pən 'i:ə

So priketh hem nature in hir corages
(so nature pricks them in their hearts);
sɔ: 'prɪkəθ 'hem na'tiʊr ɪn 'hɪr kɔ:rə:dʒəs

Thanne longen folk to goon on
pilgrimages...

then people long to go on pilgrimages...
θan 'lɔ:ŋgən 'fɔlk tɔ: 'gɔ:n ɔn, pɪlgrɪ'ma:dʒəs
(Phonetic transcription after A. C. Gimson, 1962.)

GRAMMAR

Noun Phrase

-s, -es for plural and possessive (but no apostrophe)

nouns sometimes without possessive

myn owen herte blood sone **by my fader soule** **Venus**

nouns with irregular plural (ModE) (**men, gees; sheep; oxen** as in

ten hors, ten vers **eyen, shoon, foon, keen**

Pronouns

Singular

<i>First Person</i>	<i>Second Person</i>	<i>Third Person</i>		
N. I	thou	he	she	hit
G. my, myn ¹⁰	thy, thyn ¹⁰	his	hir	his
D. me	thee	him	hir	him
A. me	thee	him	hir	hit

Plural

<i>First Person</i>	<i>Second Person</i>	<i>Third Person</i>
N. we	ye	they
G. oure	youre	hir
D. us	yow	hem
A. us	yow	hem

Note Contractions: **artow, arte; hastow; shaltou, wiltow, maistow** etc

even: **seistow, wostow, hydestow, wenestow, prechestow** etc

Adjectives

Final **-e** for plural and weak declension in one-syllable adjectives

**smale fowles the yonge sonne youre rede
colera**

also in trisyllabic adjectives

O wommanliche wyf the semelieste man

and in survivals of old dative

of olde tyme with harde grace in salte see

Adverbs

Regular endings in **-e, -ly, -liche**

brighte stille namely/nameliche royally/royalliche

a few adverbs end in **-es** or **-en**

**ones (atones), twyes, certes, elles aboven,
abouten**

note adverbial phrases

atte beste atte laste for the nones

his thanks hire thanks ‘of his/their own free will; voluntarily’

Verb Phrase

Present Indicative

	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Sing.</i>		
1.	drink-e	hop-e
2.	drink-est	hop-est
3.	drink-eth	hop-eth
<i>Pl.</i>	drink-e(n)	hop-e(n)

Present Subjunctive

<i>Sing.</i>	drink-e	hop-e
<i>Pl.</i>	drink-e(n)	hop-e(n)

Preterite Indicative

<i>Sing.</i>		
1.	drank, dronk	hop-ed(e)
2.	dronk-e	hop-edest
3.	drank, dronk	hop-ed(e)
<i>Pl.</i>	dronk-e(n)	hop-ed(e)(n), hop-ed

Preterite Subjunctive

<i>Sing.</i>	drink-e	hop-ed(e)
<i>Pl.</i>	drink-e(n)	hop-ed(e)(n)

Imperative

<i>Sing.</i>	drink	hop-e
<i>Pl.</i>	drink-eth, drink-e	hop-eth

Infinitive

drink-e(n)	hop-e(n)
-------------------	-----------------

Present Participle

drink-ing(e)	hop-ing(e)
---------------------	-------------------

Past Participle

dronk-e(n)	hop-ed
-------------------	---------------

Note: participle prefix **y- (-i)** in **yronne**, **iride(n)**

Note: Impersonal constructions

me thinketh - me thoughte me mette he may ride wher hym
list

it liketh me

it remembreth me

Relative Clause

Often **which** or **whom** with preposition

this wydwe, of which I telle yow my tale

my suster Emelye for whom ye have this strif

or with **that**

on his perche that was in the halle

sometimes with **that** and a resumptive pronoun

ther is no newe gyse that it nas old

or even with **which that**

two lordes, which that were of gret renoun

Note also **ther** for **in which** in locatives

unto the lystes ther hire temple was

Negation

Multiple Negation

No wyn ne drank sherepleccioun ne made hire nevere sik

I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun

Note Negative Contractions

nam	ne am
nys, nis	ne is
nas	ne was
nere	ne were
noot	ne wot
nyste	ne wiste
nille, nyl	ne wille
bolde	ne wolde

Word Order

**To hem have I so gret affeccioun
 As I seyde erst, whanne comen is the May
 That in my bed ther daweth me no day
 That I nam up and walkyng in the mede**
 (Legend of Good Women, Text F 44-47)

Vocabulary

By comparison with OE, lots of French and Latin words:

perced, veyne, licour, vertu, engendred, flour

The famous word pairs (attributed to Sir Walter Scott):

ox	beef
sheep	mutton
calf	veal
deer	venison
pig, swine	pork

but there are many others, e.g.:

begin	commence
child	infant
doom	judgment
freedom	liberty
hearty	cordial
help	aid
hide	conceal
wedding	marriage
wish	desire

Also note regular correspondences

ME	er	ModE	ar, ear, ur, ir
-----------	-----------	-------------	------------------------

Cherl	churl
--------------	--------------

Derk	dark
-------------	-------------

Ers	arse
------------	-------------

Gerl	girl
-------------	-------------

Hert	heart
-------------	--------------

Merk	mark
-------------	-------------

Clerk	clerk	same spelling, diff pronunciation in BE [ar]
--------------	--------------	---

4. ME text samples

XV. 11. A man hadde twei sones. 12. And the yonger of hem seide to the fadir, "Fadir, yiue me the porcioun of catel that fallith to me." And he departide to hem the catel. 13. And not aftir many daies, whanne alle thingis weren gederid togider, the yonger sone wente forth in pilgrymage in to a fer cuntre; and there he wastide hise goodis in lyuyng lecherously. 14. And aftir that he hadde endid alle thingis, a strong hungre was maad in that cuntre, and he bigan to haue nede. 15. And he wente, and drough hym to oon of the citeseyns of that cuntre. And he sente hym in to his toun, to fede swyn. 16. And he coueitide to fille his wombe of the coddis that the hoggis eeten, and no man yaf hym. 17. And he turnede ayen to hym silf, and seide, "Hou many hirid men in my fadir hous han plente of looues; and Y perische here thorough hungir. . . ." 20. And he roos vp, and cam to his fadir. And whanne he was yit afer, his fadir saigh hym, and was stirrid bi mercy. And he ran, and fel on his necke, and kyside hym. 21. And the sone saide to hym, "Fadir, Y haue synned in to heuene, and bifor thee; and now Y am not worthi to be clepid thi sone." 22. And the fadir seide to hise seruauntis, "Swithe brynge ye forth the firste stoole, and clothe ye hym, and yiue ye a ryng in his hoond, and schoon on hise feet. 23. And brynge ye a fat calf, and sle ye, and ete we, and make we feeste. 24. For this my sone was deed, and hath lyued ayen; he perischid, and is foundun."

Pyles/Algeo, p. 164

for comp. **Langland, Shepherd:**

William Langland (ca. 1330-ca. 1386)

Piers Plowman: The Prologue

In a somer sesun, whon softe was the sonne,
I schop me into a shroud, as I a scheep were;

In habite as an hermite unholy of werkes
Wente I wyde in this world wondres to here;
Bote in a Mayes morwynyge on Malverne hilles
Me bifel a ferly, of fairie, me-thoughte.
I was wery, forwandred, and wente me to reste
Undur a brod banke bi a bourne side;
And as I lay and leonede and lokede on the watres,
I slumbrede in a slepynge, hit swyed so murie.
Thenne gon I meeten a mervelous sweven,
That I was in a wilderness, wuste I never where;
And as I beheold into the est an heigh to the sonne,
I sauh a tour on a toft, tryelyche i-maket;
A deop dale bineothe, a dungun ther-inne,
With deop dich and derk and dredful of sighte.
A feir feld full of folk fond I ther bitwene,
Of alle maner of men, the mene and the riche,
Worching and wandringe as the world asketh.