

# Part One



# I

## 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 Englissh and in wrytyng of oure tonge' (*Troilus* 5.1793–4). This complaint makes a necessary distinction, between 'Englissh' 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, 8.2, 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*, *twa*, *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 *Langland: 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*

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. Laʒamon 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 Laʒamon’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.