

# Introduction to Middle English (ME)

The linguistic variety within ME is enormous. Note the words of Strang, who says of the ME period, which, in the context of her book runs essentially from 1370–1570, that it

“is the revolutionary period in which the structure of modern English was established. Much of that characteristic structure has been there since the beginnings of our records, but where change can be detected, it is most fundamental at this time.”

And this she credits to the urbanization that dates from the same period and the contact between varieties of English which it brought about (Strang 1970: 212).

The language at the beginning of the period was essentially Old English, and many of the earlier documents available represent Old more than Middle English. However, following the Norman Conquest (1066) the stage was set for relatively rapid change in a language already undergoing significant change. There is *relatively* little documentation of English in the early ME period since the language was supplanted by French in upper class speech and Latin in official documents. Furthermore, the unifying effect of the written (Wessex) standard of OE gradually diminished leaving a situation in which the various regional vernaculars could develop independently of this tradition. Consequently, by the second half of the ME period, when English once more appears in texts of all sorts, the language we are confronted with shows an extraordinary amount of change.

This link is intended to provide a brief introduction to the structure of ME. Most of the illustrations used in this hyperlink have been taken from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (CT), which were written in the late fourteenth century. This may be justified by the fact that the CT are the ME text which is most widely read today.

Strang, B.M.H. (1970) *A History of English*. London: Methuen.

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## Written Middle English (ME)

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### Alphabet and orthography in ME

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#### *The alphabet in ME*

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varied only minimally from the current one. ModE has 26 letters, not counting a number of rare diacritics – usually in words borrowed from foreign languages – such as <ç> as in *façade* or <ï> in *naïve*, both borrowed from French and special signs such as the ampersand <&>. The ME alphabet had the same letters as ModE with the following exceptions.

ME continued to use a few now abandoned letters that were common in OE such as the ligature (two letters written as one) <æ>. Example: *unnfæle* “cruel” as in *Patt tatt unnfæle herode king*, “That the cruel king Herod” (*Ormulum*, “Admonitions to Kings and Lords,” late twelfth century: l. 3). (A second ligature <œ> shows up occasionally.) Several once common OE letters continued to be used in ME, though with decreasing frequency. One was thorn <þ> for <th>, as some versions of the *Canterbury Tales* still have in line 18 (along with the equivalent digraph <th>): *That hem hath holpen whan þat they were seeke*, “That had helped them when they were sick.” Also maintained is yogh <ȝ>, though chiefly in early ME texts. Example: *Maȝew þe goddspellwrihtre seȝȝþ*, “Matthew, the Evangelist, saith” (*Ormulum*, *ibid.*: l. 1). Or: eth <ð> (again for modern <th>). Example: “a-murðrin, v. to murder.” Here and in the following all the dictionary examples are quoted from Mayhew and Skeat 1886. *A Concise Dictionary of Middle English*. The abbreviations refer to the source texts; “AS” means “Anglo-Saxon,” an earlier designation for Old English (OE). See below *Dictionaries of ME*.

The ME alphabet, not counting the five letters just mentioned, was identical to the ModE one, but used them at times very differently. See discussion under *orthography and phonology*.

For one thing <j> was very rare. The letter <i> served for both the vowel əi/ as in ModE and for the consonant /dʒ/, especially in words borrowed from French, where ModE uses both <j> and <g>. Furthermore, ME also used <g> for /dʒ/. Examples (underlined> of

- initial <i> as /dʒ/ and medial <i> as /i/: “**Ierkin**, *sb.* jerkin, jacket, S3.—Cp. Du. *jurk*, a frock;
- initial <i> and medial <i> as /i/: **I-lokien**, *v.* to observe, S”; **iloken**, S.—AS. *ge-lócian*”;
- initial <i> and medial <g> as /dʒ/: “**Iugen**, *v.* to judge, decide, PP; **iugge**, PP, CM.—OF. *juger*; Lat. *iudicare*.”

<i> is occasionally used for /j/ in some words of Germanic origin where <y>, the more usual spelling of /j/ had not yet replaced it. Example of

- <i> for /j/; <g> both times for /g/: “**Iunglenges**, *sb. pl.*, disciples, S; see **3onglyng**.”

Both <i> and <y> could appear for /i/ in free variation. Example: “**Un-vysible**, *adj.* invisible, W.”

Second, there was no clear distinction between <u> and <v>. The two are allographs (alternative forms) of each other and represent both the vowel /u/ and the consonant /v/. Note that <v> never represents a vowel in non-initial position. Examples of

- <u> as an initial consonant /v/: “**Uenie**, *sb.* supplication for pardon on one’s knees, S.—Church Lat. *venia* (Ducange)”;
- <u> as a medial consonant /v/: “**Auaunce**, *v.* to advance, NED, S3, C, C3, P; **awance**, S3; **avaunset**, *pp.*, S2; **auanced**, S2.—OF. *advancer*.”

As if to make the confusion greater, <u> was used in the South for /f/. Example: “**Uaren**, *v.* to fare, S; see **Faren**.”

For <u> as a vowel we find examples like the following:

- as an initial vowel /u/: “**Umbe-grouen**, *pp.* grown all round, S2”;
- as a medial vowel /u/: “**Iunglenges**, *sb. pl.*, disciples, S; see **3onglyng**.”

In the case of <v> we have the following:

- as an initial consonant /v/: “**Ver**, *sb.* glass, W2; **verre**, HD.—OF. *verre* (*voirre*); Lat. *uitrum*”;
- as an initial vowel /u/: “**Vmbe-cast**, *v.* to cast about, consider, ponder, B; **umbekestez**, *pr. s.*, S2”;
- as a medial consonant /v/: “**Universite**, *sb.* universe, world, W.—OF. *universite*; Lat. *universitatem* (Vulg.)”; or: “**Un-vysible**, *adj.* invisible, W.”

Closely related is the use of <uu>, <vv>, and <w> for /w/. Example (with both <vv> and <w>): *Ne lef þu nawt leoue feader þat tu offeare me swva; ich swerie azein*, “Don’t leave anything, dear Father, that you would offer me so; I vow again” (*The Life of St. Juliana*: ll. 80–81).

### Orthography and phonology in ME

The orthographic system introduced in connection with the standardization of West Saxon (the written Wessex standard) continued to be practiced after the Conquest. However, the surviving standard was no longer prestigious and gradually grew outdated because of change in the vernacular. Many of the subsequent somewhat confusing ME spelling conventions were the result of the adoption of French and Latin orthographic traditions, which were at times in conflict with OE spelling practices. For example, the non-Latin letters mentioned above (<þ, ȝ, ð> as well as winn <p> for <w> fell into disuse. Eventually, <y>, which originally represented /y/ (pronounced like German <ü> or French <u>) came to be used as a consonant for /j/. Independent of these considerations <k> began to come into use, especially before <e, i>, where <ce> and <ci> could lead to misinterpretation as /s/ rather than /k/. Examples: *keye* for OE *cæg* or *king* for OE *cyning*.

Among the grapheme combinations, OE <hw> for /hw/ was somewhat illogically reversed to <wh>, probably under the influence of other combinations which used <h> as a diacritic, esp. <th>, <ch>, and <sh/sch>. In the North and East Anglia <qu, u> and in east Midlands <w> were also used for /hw/. Examples:

**Whan**, *adv. interrog., conj.* when, S2, C2; **whane**, S; **whanne**, S, W; **hwanne**, S; **huanne**, S2; **hwenne**, S; **hwan**, S; **hwen**, S; **hwon**, S; **wanne**, S, S2; **wonne**, S; **wane**, S, S2; **wone**, S; **wan**, S; **won**, S; **quanne**, S; **quane**, S; **quan**, S; **quuan**, S; **quen**, S2; **quene**, S. *Comb.*: **whannse**, whensoever, S.—AS. *hwanne*.

OE <cw> for /kw/ (retained in the sample text from the *Ormulum*, see below) gradually shifted to French-influenced <qu>. Example:

**Quik**, *adj. and adv.* living, quick, flowing (of water), S, S2, W; **quic**, S, S2; **quek**, S2; **quyk**, S3, W, W2; **cwic**, S; **c\wike**, S; **cwuice**, S; **quicke**, S; **quike**, *pl.*, S, S2; **quyke**, S, C; **quycke**, S3.—AS. *cwic* (*cuc*); cp. OHG. *quek* (Otfrid).

By ME times <c> for /tʃ/ had been replaced by <ch> and <sc> for /ʃ/, by <sch> and <sh>. Examples:

**Chaf**, *sb.* chaff, straw, MD; **chaff**, MD; **chaffe**, W, Prompt.; **chef**, MD; **caf**, H; **cafe**, H.—AS. *ceaf* and “**Scheep**, *sb.* sheep, Prompt.; **shep**, S; **schepe**, Cath.; *pl.*, S2; **shep**, S; **sep**, S.—AS. *scēap*.

An account of changes in the spelling of the vowels is considerably more challenging since there were significant regional differences in pronunciation. A few examples will have to suffice. OE <y>, originally rounded front /y(:)/, had become <e> in the Southeast, but rounding was retained in the Southwest where, a French spelling, but also <ui> and <uy> occurred. High back rounded /u:/ was frequently spelled <ou> in French fashion. And the raising of OE ā to /ɔ:/ led to the use of <o> or <oo>. Examples of

- <u>, <ui>, <uy>: “**Burde**, *sb.* maiden, virgin, lady, S, S2, PP; **birde**, P; **berde**, PP; **buirde**, PP; **buyrde**, S2, PP; see **Bryde**”;

- <o>, <oo>: “**Cole**, *sb.* charcoal, coal, S, S2; **coole**, MD; **coylle**, MD; **coles**, *pl.*, C2, C3; **coolis**, W; **koles**, S2.—AS. *col* (OET).”

One last point concerns the *Ormulum*, a twelfth century East Midlands work, of which some 20,000 short – or 10,000 long – lines remain extant. Its composition, much of which has been lost, may have stretched over several decades, perhaps from mid-century until about 1180. This poetry has not been praised because of its literary quality, for it was dogmatic in the use of consistently long lines of 15 beats in iambic feet, but without rhyme. It also contains a great deal of repetition, as ll. 1–2 and 9–10 in the excerpt below plainly shows. It has relatively few loan words from French, but it provides evidence of the influence of ON in ME since it contains 120 such items (Geipel 1971: 64) and includes English-Danish doublets, e.g. l. 14 *dredinng* 7 *aʒ<sup>h</sup>e* (*dread* (< OE *dræ:dan*) and *awe* (< ON *agi*)). What is linguistically most impressive about the *Ormulum* is the use of spelling to indicate the author’s pronunciation. Short and long vowels, which had not been orthographically distinguished in OE, were differentiated here: the short ones were followed by double consonant-letters and the long ones by only one, e.g. l. 5 *follc* (“folk, people”) /ʊ/ vs. l. 7 *god* (“good”) /o:/. Orm also distinguished between /g/ using <g> and /j/ or /x/ using <ʒ>, e.g. *grimme* (“grim, fierce”) with /g/ (l. 2) vs. *ʒiff* (“if”) with /j/ (l. 1). Orm, the author, also sometimes used single accents to mark long vowels (l. 2 *tór* “difficult”) or double ones (l. 7 *út* “out”). The symbol <7> stands for the word *and*. The content of this text is part of Orm’s admonitions, occasional passages in which he offers criticism of the social conditions of his times.

|  |    |  |
|--|----|--|
| <i>Forr ʒiff þe riche mann iss brap</i>          |    | For if the powerful man is wrathful      |
| <i>7 grimme. 7 tór to cwememm;</i>               |    | And fierce and hard to please,           |
| <i>Hiss lede þatt iss unnderr himm</i>           |    | His people that are under him            |
| <i>Himm dredeþþ þess te mare</i>                 |    | Will fear him all the more.              |
| <i>7 tohh swa þehh ne till þe follc</i>          | 5  | But yet neither for the people           |
| <i>Ne till þe laferrd nowwþerr.</i>              |    | Nor for the lord                         |
| <i>Niss þatt nohht þwerret út god inoh.</i>      |    | Will it be particularly good             |
| <i>Tell þeʒʒre sawle berhless.</i>               |    | For the salvation of their souls         |
| <i>þatt he be grimme. 7 aʒ<sup>h</sup>efull.</i> |    | That he is fierce and frightening        |
| <i>7 brap 7 tór to cwemenn.</i>                  | 10 | And wrathful and hard to please.         |
| <i>Forr he maʒʒ ben swa gramme mann;</i>         |    | For he may be so fierce a man            |
| <i>þatt he bep laþ hiss lede.</i>                |    | That he is hateful to his people.        |
| <i>7 tohh swa þehh iss ned tatt he.</i>          |    | But nevertheless it is necessary that he |
| <i>Dreding. 7 aʒ<sup>h</sup>e sette.</i>         |    | Impose dread and awe                     |
| <i>Onn alle þa þatt lufenn toþþ</i>              | 15 | On all those who love [lawlessness]      |
| <i>7 woh 7 unnashhtnesse.</i>                    |    | And wrongdoing and conflict              |

(from inserted leaves 11b–c in MS Junius 1: see *Ormulum Project*)

**Sample text:** Admonition from the *Ormulum* (= *History of English*, Text 4.5)

Geipel, J. (1971) *The Viking Legacy: The Scandinavian Influence on the English and Gaelic Languages*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles.

## Pronunciation of ME

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### Vowels of ME

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If we overlook the regional differences and go by the clues we have from spelling (especially the spelling in *Ormulum*, which indicates short and long vowels; see *Orthography and phonology in ME*), we can assume that there were five short vowels, seven long ones, and five diphthongs. Note that the **Great Vowel Shift** seems to have begun in the ME period, but not to have been completed until the EModE period. Consequently, the high long vowels /uː/ and /iː/ might have a slight amount of diphthongization, but the hardly “full” diphthongization they were eventually to take on.

### The short vowels

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are the following:

- /a/ spelled with <a> as in *smal* or *that*
- /e/ spelled with <e> as in *hem* or *ende*
- /i/ spelled with <y> as in *gynglen*; or with <i> as in *hir*
- /ɔ/ spelled with <o> as in *softe*
- /u/ spelled with <u> as in *hunters* or *but*

### Unstressed schwa

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was usually pronounced for <e> in final position, but also in unstressed syllables. Examples: *shoures soote*

### The long vowels

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are the following:

- /aː/ spelled with <a> as in *smale* or with <aa> as in *prelaat*
- /æː/ spelled with <e> as in *esy* or with <ee> as in *deed*
- /eː/ spelled with <e> as in *grene*, with <ee> as in *EEK*, or <ie> as in *chiere*
- /iː/ spelled with <i> as in *licour* or <y> as in *yronne*
- /ɔː/ spelled with <o> as in *grobe* or <oo> as in *roost*
- /oː/ spelled with <o> as in *open* or <oo> as in *roote*
- /uː/ spelled with <ow> as in *yow* or <ou> as in *shoures*

### The diphthongs

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are the following:

- /ai/ spelled with <ay> as in *day*, with <ey> as in *pleye*, or with <ei> as in *certainly*
- /oi/ spelled with <oi> as in *boille* or with <oy> as in *floytynge*
- /au/ spelled with <aw> as in *lawe* or with <au> as in *taught* or *Caunterbury*
- /ou/ spelled with <ow> as in *gowne* or with <ou> as in *thoughte*
- /iu/ spelled with <ew> as in *lewed*, with <u> as in *vertu*, or with <y> as in *stywardes*

## Consonants of ME

are relatively similar to the inventory of the ModE consonants. Consequently, only differences are dealt with in the following.

**/v/ and /f/** are no longer in complementary distribution as they were in OE. Nevertheless, initial /f/ is much more common than initial /v/, which is most common in words of French origin. Examples: *veyne* “vein,” *vertu* “power,” and *vileyne* “villainy.” Likewise, medial /-f-/ is rare; it is found in words of French origin and in consonant clusters such as /ft/. Examples: *parfit* “perfect,” *countrefete* “imitate, counterfeit,” and *thriftily*.

**/z/** is generally found only between vowels. Examples: *cosin* “cousin,” *esed* “put at ease,” and *ryse* “rise.” It may also occur at the beginning of some borrowed words. Example: *Zephirus*.

**/dʒ/** occurs in words borrowed from French. Examples: *engendred* “created, engendered,” *iuge* “judge,” and *corages* “manner, mood.”

**/ʒ/** had not yet emerged as an independent phoneme. Words with /ʒ/ in Modern French were still pronounced with /dʒ/ in this period; hence, borrowings such as *gentil* were very likely pronounced with /dʒ/.

**/θ/ and /ð/** probably do not have the distribution they have in ModE. However, the OE distribution with initial and final /θ/ and medial, intervocalic /ð/ is no longer strictly observed.

**/r/** is pronounced everywhere including before consonants and in final position. Examples: *March* and *perced* as well as *flour* and *hir*.

**/h/** including /ç/ and /x/ as in *hooly* with /h/, *nyght* with /ç/, and *droughte* with /x/. Note, however, that all three allophones of /h/ were weakening in this period.

**/w/ and /hw/** were still strictly differentiated as reflected in the spelling: /w/ as <w> and /hw/ as <wh>. Examples: /w/ in *with* and *sweete*; /hw/ in *whan* and *whil*.

## The sentence

### Word order in ME

Generally ME word order is like it is in ModE, viz. SVO (Subject-Verb-Object). However, quite a bit of variation is possible. The following well-known passage, the first 18 lines of the “General Prologue” of the *Canterbury Tales*, can serve as an illustration of this variation. Even though some of the structures may well be motivated by the meter and rhyme of the poetry and therefore not represent colloquial spoken ME, what is important to note is that the 12 finite verbs, whose structures are marked below, represent possible word order structures.

S = Subject; V = Verb/Predicate, including auxiliaries (V<sub>aux</sub>) and lexical verbs (V<sub>lex</sub>); O = Object; A = Adjunct. S, V, and O are given in shortened form, e.g. *The droghthe of March*, which as a whole forms the subject in l. 3 below, is given as *droghthe*. Adjuncts are given in full, but only when they precede the subject, verb, or object.

### Sample text

Whan that **Aprill** with hise shoures soote  
 When April with its sweet showers  
*The droghthe of March hath perced to*  
*the roote*  
 Has penetrated the drought of March to  
 the root

S (*Aprill*) – O (*droghthe*) –

V<sub>aux</sub>+V<sub>lex</sub> (*hath perced*)

SOV



|   |  |                                     |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| And <b>bathed</b> every <b>veyne</b> in swich licour;         | S (as above) – V <sub>lex</sub> ( <i>bathed</i> ) – O ( <i>veyne</i> )                     | SVO                                 |
| And bathed every vein in sweet liquid;                        |  |                                     |
| <b>Of which vertu engendred is the flour;</b>                 | A ( <i>of which vertu</i> ) – V <sub>lex</sub> ( <i>engendred</i> ) –                      |                                     |
| Whose power engenders the flower;                             | V <sub>aux</sub> ( <i>is</i> ) – S ( <i>flour</i> )  | AVS                                 |
| Whan <b>Zephirus</b> eek with his sweete breeth               | 5 S ( <i>Zephirus</i> ) –  |                                     |
| When Zephirus* has also breathed                              |  |                                     |
| <b>Inspired hath</b> in every holt and heath                  | V <sub>lex</sub> ( <i>inspired</i> ) – V <sub>aux</sub> ( <i>hath</i> )                    |                                     |
| His sweet breath into every woods and                         |  |                                     |
| heath   |  |                                     |
| <i>The tendre</i> <b>croppes</b> ; and the yonge <b>sonne</b> | O ( <i>croppes</i> )   | SVO                                 |
| onto the tender crops; and the young sun                      | S ( <i>sonne</i> ) –   |                                     |
| <b>Hath</b> in the Ram his halfe <b>cours yronne</b> ,        | V <sub>aux</sub> ( <i>hath</i> ) – O ( <i>cours</i> ) – V <sub>lex</sub> ( <i>yronne</i> ) | SV <sub>aux</sub> OV <sub>lex</sub> |
| Has run half its course in the Ram**                          |  |                                     |
| And smale <b>foweles maken melodye</b> ,                      | S ( <i>foweles</i> ) – V <sub>lex</sub> ( <i>maken</i> ) – O ( <i>melodye</i> )            | SVO                                 |
| And little birds make their melodies                          |  |                                     |
| <b>That slepen</b> al the nyght with open eye,                | 10 S ( <i>That</i> ) – V <sub>lex</sub> ( <i>slepen</i> )                                  | SV                                  |
| Ones that sleep all night with open eyes,                     |  |                                     |
| ( <b>So priketh hem nature</b> in hir corages);               | A ( <i>So</i> ) – V <sub>lex</sub> ( <i>priketh</i> ) – O ( <i>hem</i> )                   | AVOS                                |
| (So Nature stimulates them in their                           | S ( <i>nature</i> )  |                                     |
| feelings);  |  |                                     |
| <b>Thanne longen folk</b> to goon on pilgrimages              | A ( <i>Thanne</i> ) – V ( <i>longen</i> ) – S ( <i>folk</i> )                              | AVS                                 |
| Then people long to go on pilgrimages                         |  |                                     |
| And Palmeres for to seken straunge strondes                   |  |                                     |
| And palmers*** to search out strange strands                  |  |                                     |
| To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes.                     |  |                                     |
| Going to distant saints, known in                             |  |                                     |
| sundry lands.   |  |                                     |
| And specially from every shires ende                          | 15   |                                     |
| And especially from the corner of every shire                 |  |                                     |
| Of Engelond, <b>to Caunterbury they wende</b> ,               | A ( <i>to Caunterbury</i> ) – S ( <i>they</i> ) – V ( <i>wende</i> )                       | ASV                                 |
| Of England they wander to Canterbury,                         |  |                                     |
| The hooly blisful martir for to seke                          |  |                                     |
| To seek the holy blessed martyr****                           |  |                                     |
| <b>That hem hath holpen</b> , whan þat <b>they were</b>       | S ( <i>That</i> ) – O ( <i>hem</i> ) – V <sub>aux</sub> +V <sub>lex</sub>                  | SOV                                 |
| <b>seeke</b> .  | ( <i>hath holpen</i> )   |                                     |
| Who helped them when they were sick                           | S ( <i>they</i> ) – V ( <i>were seeke</i> )  | SV                                  |

\* god of the west wind

\*\* Aries the Ram, the sign in the Zodiac for the time from March 21 till April 19

\*\*\* a pilgrim who carried a palm frond as a sign that he or she had been to the Holy Land

\*\*\*\* Thomas a Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury, killed before the altar in 1170 possibly at the instigation of King Henry II



This passage reveals four different patterns, patterns that are essentially substantiated by the discussion in Fischer (1992: 370–377). The first three are cases of “verb-second” word order – or modified verb-second in the case of ASV (see comment below); the final pair are cases of “verb-final” word order (case three fits both the verb-second and verb-final patterns):

- subject immediately before verb: SV(O) / ASV (7 times);
- adjunct before verb and verb before subject: AVS/ AVOS (3 times);
- auxiliary verb in second position and lexical verb in final position: SV<sub>aux</sub>OV<sub>lex</sub> (once);
- object before verb: SOV (twice).

Fischer, O. (1992) “Syntax,” In: N. Blake (ed.) *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. vol. 2 1066–1476. Cambridge: CUP, 207–408.

The following is a comment on the patterns given in the bullets above.

### Verb-second positioning

was common in OE and still strong in ME (it is the case in nine out of the 12 cases pointed out in the text above); and it included SV(O), AVO, and SV<sub>aux</sub>OV<sub>lex</sub>.

#### SVO

This has become the default word order in ModE and was already the most common type in ME. In the passage quoted above it occurs in 50% of the cases. However, no claim can be made that this passage is truly representative. SVO is transitive, i.e. the verb has an object. SV is intransitive, i.e. the verb does not have an object. ASV above is also intransitive, but violates the verb-second principle. It is listed separately because it stands in contrast to the numerous cases in which a preceding adjunct led to inversion of subject and verb (read more below on AVS for a comment on this). The tendency toward SVO word order was probably the major factor leading to the introduction in the ME period of the dummy subjects *it* and *there* even though they were not yet mandatory (cf. Strang 1970: 211). Examples with dummy *there* and *it*: *A KNYGHT **ther was*** (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 43), or: ***It is** ful fair to been ycleped “madame,”* “It is only fair to be addressed as ‘Madam’” (*ibid.*: l. 378). Example without a (dummy) subject: ***Bifil** that in that seson, on a day, / In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay / Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage,* where the verb *bifil* “it happened/occurred” appears without an overt subject (*ibid.*: ll. 19–21).

Strang, B.M.H. (1970) *A History of English*. London: Methuen.

#### AVS

An initial adverbial (an adjunct) originally led to inversion of subject and verb so that the verb might remain in the second structural position. In Modern German, a sister language of English, this is still the case, cf. *Gestern kam ich*, “Yesterday I came,” literally *Yesterday came I*. In ME this principle had already grown weaker, but was still frequently observed. By the fifteenth century the triggering of verb-second positioning after an initial adverbial sentence constituent was increasingly only set off by initial *wh*- and negative elements (cf. Fischer 1992: 375).

## AVSO

The lack of periphrastic *do* in ME meant that questions were formed with direct subject-verb inversion. Example: *Or where **comanded he** virginitee?* “Or where **did He** [God] **command** virginity?” (*CT-Wife of Bath’s Prologue*: l. 62).

## A note on subject-verb inversion in ME and in ModE

AVSO is still the case in ModE under certain conditions. Verb-second word order in ME as retained in ModE:

**Variant (1):** Inversion is obligatory and involves an auxiliary or the verb BE (sometimes lexical HAVE):

- (a) In **yes-no questions** [V – S]. Examples: ***Have ye** so greet envye / Of myn honour, that thus compleyne and crye?* “**Have you** such great envy / Of my honor that so complain and cry?” (*CT-Knight’s Tale*: ll. 907–908) ... ***is nat that** an heigh folye?* “... **is not that** a grand folly?” (ibid.: l. 1798).
- (b) In **wh-questions** [*wh-word* – V<sub>aux</sub> – S – V<sub>lex</sub>]. Example (reference to the parson): ... *if gold ruste, what **shal iren** do?* “...if gold rust, what **will iron** do?” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 502).
- (c) After a **non-assertive**, i.e. negative and semi-negative adjunct [**non-assertive Adjunct** – V<sub>aux</sub> – S]. Examples: *And eek it is nat likly al thy lyf / To stonden in hir grace; **namoore shal I**,* “And also it is not likely all thy life / To stand in her grace; **never more shall I**,” (*CT-Knight’s Tale*: ll. 1172–1173).
- (d) Questions with inversion involving **the second person singular subject thou** are so common that the pronoun is often affixed to the verb. Example: *What **wiltow seyen?*** “**Whaddayuh** say?” (ibid.: l. 1156).

**Variant (2):** Inversion is optional and involves the lexical verb only:

- (a) After an initial **adjunct of place or direction/goal** [**Adjunct of place** + V + S]; the subject must contain a noun. Examples: With a noun subject: ***To Caunterbury** with ful devout corage, / At nyght **was come** into that hostelrye / **Wel nyne and twenty** in a compaignye / Of sondry folk ...*, “**To Canterbury** with very devout courage, / Into the hostel at night **came** / **Some twenty-nine** in a company / Of diverse people ...” (*CT-General Prologue*: ll. 22–25). With a pronoun subject there is no inversion: ***to Caunterbury they wende**,* “**To Canterbury they went**” (ibid.: l. 15).
- (b) With a **verb of direct speech**; the subject must contain a noun (but see (c)). Example: *What fold been ye, that at myn homcomynge / Perturben so my feste with crynge? / **Quod theseus**,* “What people are you that at my homecoming / [You] disturb my celebration with such wailing?’ / **Asked Theseus**” (*CT-Knight’s Tale*: ll. 405–407).
- (c) If the subject is a pronoun, inversion occurs only with **the verb SAY**. Examples: “*Purs is the erchede-kenes helle,*” ***seyde he**,* “‘[Payment into] the Archdeacon’s purse was his Hell [punishment],’ **said he** [the Summoner]” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 660); or with QUOD: “*Cometh neer,*” ***quod he**,* “my lady Prioress, / And ye, Sir Clerk, lat be youre shamefastnesse, / Ne studieth noght; ley hond to, every man!” “‘Come near,’ **said he** [the Host], ‘my Lady Prioress, / And you, Sir Clerk, let your shamefastness be, / Let your studies be; put your hand to it, everyone!’” (ibid.: ll. 841–843).

## Object before verb

was common in OE; some would even say that SOV was the basic word order of the earlier period. In the ME period pre-verbal positioning of the object was still common with pronoun objects (51% in the

*Ormulum*) as compared with objects containing noun heads (18%) (Fischer 1992: 372 quoting Palmatier 1969: 51), but by the end of the ME period SVO was undoubtedly the dominant pattern. The retention of pre-verbal objects was probably dependent on three factors: (1) light weight (i.e. shortness), which was more typical of pronoun than of noun phrase objects; (2) theme-rheme considerations, whereby pronouns being usually anaphoric are likely to be given and therefore to come earlier in a sentence in contrast to noun-objects which are more likely to express new information and therefore to come later. In addition, (3) the loss of case inflections favored the marking of grammatical functions such as subject and object by word order; since the personal pronouns retained distinct subject and object case forms they were less subject to the newer word order constraints (ibid.: 373–374).

Fischer, O. (1992) “Syntax,” In: N. Blake (ed.) *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. vol. 2 1066–1476. Cambridge: CUP, 207–408.

Palmatier, R.A. (1969) *A Descriptive Syntax of the Ormulum*. The Hague: Mouton.

#### SV<sub>AUX</sub>OV<sub>LEX</sub>

Past participles are also frequently separated from the auxiliary that introduces them – be it a modal or the perfect auxiliary *have* or *ben*. Examples: Modal: *That in that grove he wolde hym hyde al day*, “That in that grove he **would** [wanted to] **hide him[self]** all day” (*CT-Knight’s Tale*: l. 1481). Perfect auxiliary: *We have the deeth disserved bothe two*, “We **have done** a disservice to death, both of us” (ibid.: l. 1716).

#### SOV

This is a relic of OE word order, where the verb may come at the end in fixed expressions or in subordinate clauses. Examples: *For, God it woot, he sat ful ofte and song, Whan that his shoo ful bitterly hym wrong*, “For, **God knows**, he sat very often and sang, / When **his shoe wrung** [pinched] him very bitterly” (*CT-Wife of Bath’s Prologue*: ll. 491–492).

#### Verb-final word order in ME and in ModE

Verb-final word order in ME is retained in ModE in the following cases:

- (a) **the have-passive**: ME example [about the wives of the Haberdasher, the Dyer, the Carpenter, the Weaver, and Carpet-maker] with its ModE rendition: *It is ful fair to been ycleped ‘madame,’ / And goon to vigilies al bfore, / And have a mantel roialliche ybore*, “It is very fair to be addressed as “Madam,” / And to go to church before the others, / And to **have your mantle carried** royally” (*CT-General Prologue*: ll. 378–380) (see also below the **perfect in ME**);
- (b) **have plus an infinitive**: Example: *I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere, And wayke been the oxen in my plough*, “I **have**, God knows, a large field **to plow**, / And weak are the oxen in my plow. (*CT-Knight’s Tale*: ll. 886–887).

#### Negation in ME

lies more or less halfway between the practices of OE and of EModE. (a) The original pre-verbal negator *ne* is still found by itself as a negator. (b) However, the reinforcement of this weakly stressed particle in the form of a post-verbal particle such as *nat*, *noone*, *never* is common. (c) Sometimes *ne* merged with other elements.

(d) Frequently the *ne*-particle is simply missing, thus transferring the function of negation fully to the other element, usually *nat*. (e) The use of periphrastic *do* is rare before the end of the ME period.

- (a) **Ne alone.** *She* [the Prioress] *leet no morsel from hir lippes falle, / Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe*, “She let no crumb fall from her lips, / **Nor did** she dip her fingers deeply in her sauce (CT-General Prologue: ll. 128–129).
- (b) **Ne plus nat / noon / no / never, etc.** Examples:
- With *nat*: The *Parsoun* (parson) is described very positively, including the following: *But he ne lefte nat, for reyn ne thonder, / In siknesse nor in meschief to visite / The ferreste in his parisshe*, “But he did **not** stop for rain nor thunder, / In sickness nor in grief to visit / The most distant in his parish” (ibid.: ll. 494–496).
  - With *noon*: *With us ther was a DOCTOUR OF PHISIK; / In al this world ne was ther noon hym lik*, “With us there was a doctor of medicine; / In all this world there was **none** like him” (ibid.: ll. 413–114).
  - With *no*: *Wel koude she [again the Prioress] carie a morsel, and wel kepe / That no drope ne fille upon hir brist*, “She could eat well in tiny bites, and keep well / **Any** drop from dripping upon her breast” (ibid.: ll. 130–131).
  - With *nevere* and *no*: *He [the Knight] nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde / In al his lyf unto no maner wight*, “He **never** ever spoke coarsely / In all his life to a person of **any** manner” (ibid.: ll. 70–71). This quotation continues after two intervening lines: *He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght. / But, for to tellen yow of his array*, and goes on, as follows, with the quotation in (d) below.
- (c) **Merger of ne with another element.** *Ne* often merges with the verb. Example: *Ne + was > nas* as in the following lines about the Clerk: *As leene was his hors as is a rake, / And he nas nat right fat, I undertake, / But looked holwe and therto sobrelly*, “His horse was as thin as a rake / And he **wasn’t** fat, I undertake / But looked hollow-cheeked and earnest” (ibid.: ll. 289–291). Example: *Ne + woot > noot* “not know” *I noot how men hym calle*, “I **don’t know** what people call him” (ibid.: l. 286). Interestingly, *nat* itself is also the result of merger: OE *nāht* developed out of *nā* “no” + *wiht* “person, thing.” Various other more visible mergers also occurred in OE and were continued in ME and ModE, e.g. *never*, *neither*, *nor*.
- (d) **Nat alone:** *His hors were goode, but he [the Knight] was nat gay*, “His horse was good, but he was not cheerful” (ibid.: l. 74).
- (e) **A note on periphrastic do in negation.** The verb *do* is almost always lexical and such cases of *do* + negation as the following, where *do* is not an auxiliary, but a lexical verb, are still far from the periphrastic *do not* / *don’t* which was to emerge in the use of EModE: ... *but it / Is good that we do it nat withouten the assent / And wyl of oure freendes*, “... but it / Is good that we **don’t do** it without the assent / And the will of our friends” (CT-Melibee: ll. 1778–1780).

### Verb-second

“still operates in Middle English [see **word order in ME**]. By the fifteenth century it was mainly triggered when a *wh*-element or a negative element was the first constituent in the clause” (Fischer 1992: 375).

### Negative-first

*Not*, as remarked, is the chief marker of negation in ME. Originally it was used together with pre-verbal *ne* “not” to lend more emphasis to the negation. As time went by, it was *nat* alone that came to express negation while the original negator *ne* weakened phonetically and began to drop out of the language. One

consequence of this was that the negative marker *nat/not* no longer always preceded the verb in ME, as prescribed by the *negative-first principle*. Example: *His arwas drouped **noght***, “His [the Yeoman’s] arrows [feathers] drooped not” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 107). The eventual adoption of *do* was a way of insuring that the negator could continue to come before the lexical verb. For with the introduction of *do*, *not* followed this new auxiliary, yet still preceded the lexical verb, thus preserving the negative-first principle (cf. Mazzon 1994), e.g. *Truly, said Christian, I **do not know*** (1677–1678 in: Bunyan *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The First Stage), where *not* precedes *know*.

Fischer, O. (1992) “Syntax,” In: N. Blake (ed.) *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. vol. 2 1066–1476. Cambridge: CUP, 207–408.

Mazzon, G. (1994) “OE and ME Multiple Negation. Some Syntactic and Stylistic Remarks,” In: F. Fernández, M. Fuster, and J.J. Calvo (eds.) *English Historical Linguistics 1992*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 157–169.

### Complex clauses in ME

are very much like they are in ModE. In general, written English, especially in the late ME period, developed independently of spoken English. In its written usage the influence of Latin and French writing styles led to a greater use of complex (hypotactic) sentences (cf. Fischer 1992: 288). All the same, a few differences between ME and ModE usage are immediately noticeable. These include especially the combination of a conjunction such as *whan* or *er* with an immediately following *that* (see **conjunctions**).

Fischer, O. (1992) “Syntax,” In: N. Blake (ed.) *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. vol. 2 1066–1476. Cambridge: CUP, 207–408.

### Coordinate clauses

were connected with conjunctions such as *and*, *ac* “but,” *but*, (*either ...*) *or/oper*, *o(pe)r ... o(pe)r*, *nor*, and *for(hwi)* “for.” In general, these constructions are fairly easy to understand. Example: ll. 5–18 in *CT-General Prolog* (see text at *word order in ME*), where we find the following sequence of conjunctions: *whan Zephirus ... **and** the yonge sonne ... **and** smale foweles ... **then** longen folk ... **and** palmeres ... **and** they wende....* Here we have an example of correlative *whan ... than*, but clearly *and* dominates. A second extended example follows in the next section on **subordinate clauses**.

### Subordinate clauses

may be (a) adverbial, (b) relative, or (c) non-finite clauses, that is, clauses containing participles and infinitives, including infinitival purpose clauses. The excerpt that follows exemplifies all three. (a) Examples of adverbial clauses: Those introduced by *whil*, *er that*, and *so as*. (b) Two examples of relative clauses: those introduced by *and whiche* coordinated with *of what degree* and *in what array*. And a second example introduced by *that*. (c) Examples of non-finite clauses include those containing the verbal elements *to resound* followed immediately by *to telle*.

*“But nathelees, **whil** I have tyme and space, / **Er that** I ferther in this tale pace, / Me thynketh it acordaunt **to resound** / **To telle** yow al the condicioun / Of ech of hem, **so as** it semed me, / **And whiche** they weren, and of what degree, / **And eek in what array that** they were inne; / **And** at a knyght **than** wol I first bigynne.”*  
(*CT-General Prologue*: ll. 35–42).

“**But** nonetheless **while** I have space and time, / **Before** I continue further in this rhyme, / I think it **to be reasonable** on this occasion / **To tell** you of all the situation / Of each of them [pilgrims going to Canterbury], **just as** they appeared to me, / **And who** they were, and of **what rank or degree**, / **And also in what kind of get-up that** they were in; / **And** with the knight **then** I will first begin.”

This second, extended example is clearly less paratactic than the one illustrated in the section on **coordinate clauses**, but there are two coordinate clauses, one introduced by *but* and the other using *and*. Furthermore, two of the relative clauses are additionally introduced by coordinating *and*. In the following the main types of subordinate clauses are introduced.

#### TEMPORAL CLAUSES

were the most frequent adverbial clauses. By Late ME (Chaucer) the temporal conjunctions *þo* and *þone* had disappeared and *whan* (*that*) had replaced them. In the first 18 lines quoted earlier from the beginning of the “General Prologue” of the *CT*, the two variants of temporal *when*-clauses, with and without *that*, both appear: **Whan that** *Aprill ... hath perced to the roote* (l. 1) (also l. 18: **whan þat** *they were seeke*) and **Whan** *Zephirus eek ...* (5). The combination of a conjunction and *that* was commonly practiced in ME. ModE reveals few examples this, but *now that*, *so that*, and *in that* are still widely used. In ME, in contrast, we find relatively more, e.g. *by (the time) that*, *as that*, *whyle(s) that*, *after that*, *sith(e)/sin/sen/sithenes/ sithen that* “since,” *from/fra (the time) that*, *er/lor that*, *before that*, *til that*.

#### PURPOSE AND RESULT CLAUSES

(usually with subjunctive and indicative respectively, but also sometimes the reverse) were introduced by *that* and *so ... that*, but also by *for that* and *till that* (more temporal-consecutive); also *lest* (especially after verbs expressing fear). Example (result): *Of clooth-makyng she [the Wife of Bath] hadde swich an haunt / [that] She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt*, “In cloth-making she had **such** skill / **that** she passed those of Ypres and Ghent” (*CT-General Prologue*: ll. 449–450).

#### Causal clauses

were introduced by *for þam* (*pe*), which connected two clauses in paratactic fashion; later this developed into *for(hwy)*. *By-cause* (*that*) was widespread by Chaucer’s time. Other causal conjunctions included *now* (*that*), *sif/sin* (*that*), or just *that* alone. Examples: **By cause that** *it was old*, “**because** it was old” (ibid.: l. 174); *Now help us, lord, sith it is in thy might*, “Now help us, Lord, **since** it is in your power” (*CT-Knight’s Tale*: 930).

#### Conditional clauses

were originally often formed with (*al*)*though/theigh* and the subjunctive, but gradually less often so. Most commonly we find (3)*if* (*that*) often plus *than(ne)* or *then(ne)*, *tho*, *algates*, *certes* (etc.), sometimes *in cas*. Also more phrasal expressions, e.g. *For if so were I hadde swich myschaunce / That I in hire ne koude han no plesaunce, / Thanne sholde I lede my lyf in avoutrye ...*, “For **if it so were that I had** such misfortune / That I **could have** no pleasure in her, / Then I **would lead** my life in adultery” (*CT-Merchant’s Tale*: ll. 1433–1435). Note the parallel use of *whan* and *if*: *eke whan he wol nat visite the sike and the prisoner, if he may; eke if he love wyf or child, moore thanh resounh requireth*, “also **if** he will not visit the sick and the prisoner, if he can; and **if** he loves wife and child more than reason requires” (*CT-The Parson’s Tale*: l. 375).



Conditional clauses are frequently in the subjunctive. Past subjunctive is the rule in unreal or hypothetical conditions, though usually there is a modal in the main clause, e.g. ... *and I **were** a pope, / Nat oonly thou, but every mighty man, / ... **Sholde** have a wyf*, “And if I **were** Pope, / Not only you, but every mighty man, / ... **Would** have a wife” (CT-*The Monk’s Prologue*: ll. 1950–1953).

#### Concessive clauses

were introduced by the concessive conjunction *though that*: *And **though that** he were worthy, he was wys* (CT-*General Prologue*: l. 68).

#### Interrogative clauses

(*who, whom, which, what, where, whan*), it seems, were being gradually extended to use in the function of relative pronouns and adverbs, starting perhaps with indirect-question constructions, where interrogatives and relatives are difficult to distinguish. Example: *If even-song and morwe-song accorde, / Lat se now **who** shal telle the firste tale*, “If evening and morning song will agree / Let us now see **who** shall tell the first tale” [words of the Host] (ibid.: ll. 832–833).

#### Relative clauses

In Late OE and Early ME *þæt* had become the most commonly used relative pronoun. Its source was the neuter singular **demonstrative pronoun**. In earlier ME texts *thelþe* was also used, but after a period of co-existence with *þe* the *þæt*-form ousted the other, a process supported by the unstressed use of *þe* and its concurrent use as the definite article (Fischer 1992: 294). From the thirteenth century on *þæt* prevailed almost everywhere as the relative marker and was used in both restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses and with both animate and inanimate antecedents. In contrast, *þæt* as a sentential relative was soon replaced by *what* (Early ME) and then by *which* (Late ME and, of course, ModE). Gradually (thirteenth century) *whom* and *whose* and (*the*) *which* (*that*) came into use, usually in non-restrictive contexts. *Who* and *whose* were usually used with animate antecedents, but *which* with both animate and inanimate ones. Only at the end of the ME period did *which* begin to intrude on the territory of *that*. Chaucer preferred *that* to *which* at a ratio of 3:1; Caxton, a century later, had a ratio of 1:1 (ibid.: 296f). The introductory passage from the “General Prologue” reflects this. In it we find three relative clauses: *of **which*** (l. 4), ***that** slepen* (l. 10), ***that** hem bath holpen* (l. 18). The use of *which* in l. 4 is dictated by the impossibility of using *that* after a preposition.

*Who* as a true relative came into use only very late (EModE) as a subject. This is different from the example given above, viz. *Lat se now **who** shal telle the firste tale* (CT-*General Prologue*: ll. 833) with a “free” relative (cf. ModE *fused* relatives), i.e. one without an antecedent, but meaning something like “the person who.” The *wh*-relatives were initially used in more complex writing and were initially largely restricted to non-subject functions. Example: *For if a preest [in contrast to the good Parson] be foul, **on whom** we truste, / No wonder is a lewed man to ruste*, “For if a priest be foul **in whom** we trust, / No wonder that a common man may rust” (ibid.: ll. 503–504).

Fischer, O. (1992) “Syntax,” In: N. Blake (ed.) *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. vol. 2 1066–1476. Cambridge: CUP, 207–408.

#### Relative adverbial clauses

could be introduced by either *þar* (+ *that/as*) or increasingly by *where* (+ *as/that*). Examples: with *ther as*: *And over al, **ther as** profit sholde arise, / Curteis he [the Friar] was, and lowely of servyse*, “And all over, **where** profit



might arise, / He was courteous and of humble service” (CT-General Prologue: ll. 249–250); with *where that*: *He was war, as he caste his eye aside, / Where that ther kneled in the heighe weye / A compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye, / Ech after oother, clad in clothes blake*, “He was aware, as he cast his eye to the side, / **where** there kneled in the highway / a company of ladies, two and two, / Each behind the other, clad in black clothing” (CT-Knight’s Tale: ll. 896–899); with *where + as*: *And with that word arcite gan espye / Wher-as this lady romed to and fro*, “And at that word Arcite saw / **where** this lady was roaming to and fro” (ibid.: ll. 1112–1113). Both *where* and *there* as well as relative *as* could have spatial or temporal meanings. By the sixteenth century *where* completely displaced *there* as a relative (cf. Fischer 1992: 304–306).

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### Zero relatives

are found not so much for grammatical objects, as is the case in Standard ModE, but for subjects, something possible only in non-standard ModE. Example of a zero subject relative: *With hym ther was dwellynge a poure scolar; / [zero] hadde lerned art, ...*, “With him there was a poor scholar dwelling, / **[zero for who]** had learned art, ...” (CT-The Miller’s Tale: ll. 3184–3185). Zero relative objects are of very limited occurrence in the ME period, but develop rapidly in the EModE period.

### Participles and infinitives

The participles (present and past) denoted circumstances under which something happened. Example: *O bussh unbrent, brennyng in Moyses sighte*, “O bush **unburned, burning** in Moses’ sight” (CT-The Prioress’ Prologue: l. 468).

The infinitive in ME usually expressed purpose, and purpose clauses with infinitives commonly had an infinitive introduced by *for to*. However, verbs of desire such as *long* may be followed by an infinitive introduced by *to* alone. Examples: *The hooly blissful martir for to seke* (CT-General Prologue: l. 17); *Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages* (ibid.: l. 12). The bare infinitive, i.e. the infinitive without (*for*) *to*, was used after verbs of perception and after modal verbs, much as in ModE. Examples: *whan that I saugh hym go*, “when I **saw** him **go**” (CT-Wife of Bath’s Tale: l. 596); *and I shal yow seye*, “and I **shall say** to you” (CT-General Prologue: l. 781). However, a few verbs were followed by the bare infinitive where ModE has the *to*-infinitive. Example: *And bisily gan for the soules preye*, “And he busily **began to pray** for the souls” (ibid.: l. 303).

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## Parts of speech

### Nouns in ME

were no longer distinguished according to **grammatical gender** as they were in OE. Reference to singular entities was now made by using personal pronouns assigned according to *natural gender*, male humans and male animals are referred to by using *he-his(e)-him*, females ones by using *she-hir(e)/her(e)-hir/her*, and sexless things using *hit-his-hit*. In ModE natural gender prevails, but many animals have stereotypical default settings which count unless explicitly reversed. Examples: ModE *cat* is feminine (unless specified as a *tom cat*); *dog* is masculine (unless introduced as a *she-dog* (rare because tabooed: *bitch*); *horse* (but not *mare*) is masculine; *cow* (but not *bull*) is feminine, and so on. See also *History of English* §10.2.1.3.

### Case in the ME noun

is no longer a prominent inflectional feature. Only the genitive singular carries a distinctive case ending: {-es}. Example: *And specially fram euery shires ende*, “And specially from the limits **of** every shire” (CT-*General Prologue*: l.15); in ModE the possessive {-s} is largely restricted to animate, especially human nouns while neuter nouns such as *shire* are more likely to appear in a periphrastic *of*-construction, as given in the translation. A few ME nouns such as those which end in *-r* or in *-s* may appear in ME without a genitive {-es}. Example: *To lyven in delit was evere his wone, For he [the Franklin] was Epicurus owene sone*, “To live in delight was always his pleasure, For he was Epicurus’ own son” (ibid.: ll. 337–338). The *of*-possessive just mentioned was itself an innovation in ME which was adopted along the lines of the parallel construction in French with *de*. Example: *The droghte of March*, “the drought **of** March” (ibid.: l. 2).

### Number in the ME noun

remains important and is regularly marked for count nouns by using the ending {-es} or {-ys} as in *bookes* “books” or *erys* “ears.” Note the following special cases involving the {s}-plural.

- (a) **In words with two syllables** the second, unstressed syllable may be elided if it ends in a liquid (/l/ or /r/). Examples: *girdel* but *girdles* “belt(s)”; *maister* but *maistres* (“magister, scholar”); *fynger* but *fyngres* “finger(s).”
- (b) **Words which end in /-f/** are realized with intervocalic /-v-/ when plural. Examples: *wif* but *wyues* (“wife/-ves”); *loof* but *loues* (“loaf/-ves”). This alternation has remained in ModE, where, however, the final <e> is no longer pronounced; ME *wyuses* is bisyllabic /wiː.vɪs/ while ModE *wives* is monosyllabic /waɪvz/.
- (c) **Words ending in <s>** do not have a plural {s} added. Example: *In termes hadde he caas and doomes alle / That from the tyme of Kyng William were falle*, “In the Yearbook (*termes*) he [the Sergeant at the Law] had all the **cases** and judgments / That were decided since the time of King William” (ibid.: ll. 325–326). In ModE this principle is frequently extended to names of nationalities. Examples: (*two*) *Chinese, Portuguese, Swiss* – all cases of words ending in /z/ or /s/.

### Familiar irregular plurals

include (d) those with no overt marking and (e) those with plurals which derive from Germanic umlaut. A further group are (f) those with the once common Southern English (and ultimately Germanic-**OE weak nouns**) ending in {-en}. A few of these irregular plurals can be found in ModE usage (see following).

- (d) **Unmarked plurals** can be found with nouns such as *folk*, *hors*, *neet*, *pound*, *sheepe*, *swyn*, *thing*, *yeer*, where the same form is used as both singular and plural. There are many others as well. While *sheep* and *swine* still appear as unmarked plurals in ModE, this is no longer the case with *folk*, *horse*, *pound*, *thing*, and *year*. *Neet* (ModE *neat* “cow(s)”) itself is too archaic to be in general use. However, the principle of unmarked plurals has been partially retained for units such as *pound* and *year*, which may appear with an unmarked plural in attributive position (*a two year old car*, *a five pound turkey*; also *foot* in *six foot three inches tall*) and in some regional dialects after a numeral (*two pound of potatoes*). Quite a few animal names had unmarked plurals in ME; in ModE this principle remains and is sometimes extended to animals not yet known in the ME period. Examples: *fish* (and fish species: *bass*, *flounder*, *herring*, *salmon*, *shrimp*, *trout*, etc.), *antelope*, *bison*, *buffalo*, *grouse*, *quail*, (*rein*)*deer*. It has also been extended to wholly new words first introduced after the ME period, especially names

of ethnic groups (perhaps in this manner treating them a bit like animals). Examples: (*two*) *Bantu*, *Bedouin*, *Cherokee*, *Kiowa*, etc.

- (e) **Plurals originating in Germanic umlaut** include *foot* – *feet*; *gos* – *gees*; *man* – *men*; *m(o)us* – *mys*; *to(o)th* – *teeth*; *woman* – *women*. All of these have been retained in ModE.
- (f) **Old weak-noun plurals**. For (f) see the second *declension of the ME (weak) noun* below.

### The declensions of ME

are reduced to only two noun declensions. The first, illustrated below using *ston* “stone,” is the paradigm for most of the nouns and is thus the successor of the *strong nouns of OE*.

| ston “stone”                  | singular       | plural                                |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>nominative</b>             | <i>ston</i>    | <i>stones</i>                         |
| <b>genitive</b>               | <i>stones</i>  | <i>stones</i> (rare: <i>stonene</i> ) |
| <b>dative</b> (early ME only) | <i>ston(e)</i> | <i>stones</i>                         |
| <b>accusative</b>             | <i>ston</i>    | <i>stones</i>                         |

The second noun paradigm is a continuation of the *weak nouns of OE* and is represented by the noun *name* “name.”

| name “name”       | singular       | plural        |
|-------------------|----------------|---------------|
| <b>nominative</b> | <i>name</i>    | <i>namen</i>  |
| <b>genitive</b>   | <i>name(s)</i> | <i>namen</i>  |
| <b>dative</b>     | <i>name</i>    | <i>namene</i> |
| <b>accusative</b> | <i>name</i>    | <i>namen</i>  |

The nouns with a plural {-n} were once relatively widespread in Southern English. In the long term, however, the Northern forms with a plural {-es} spread in usage leaving only a few relic plurals in {-n} in ModE, viz. *oxen*, *children*, and *brethren*. Poetic *kine* (plural of *cow*) may be familiar to some; and some traditional dialects retain *shooen*, *eyen*, *hosen* “stockings,” and *been* “bees.”

### Reflexes of the older dative

could still be found. The best known case is *on lyve*, ModE *alive*, an old dative in a fixed expression. Example: *Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve*, “Thanks be to God, who is eternally **alive**” (*CT-Wife of Bath’s Prologue*: l. 5).

### Determiners and numerals in ME

#### Numerals

were a part of the larger class of determiners as were the articles and demonstratives (among others). The numerals were *oon*, *twol* *tweye*, *thre*, *foure*, *fyue*, *sixe*, *seuen*, *eighte*, *nyne*, *ten*, *eleuen*, *tweluel* *twelf*, *thrittene*, ...; *twenty*, *thritty*, *fourty*, *fifty*, *sixty*, *seuenty*, *eygty*, *nynety*, *hondred*, *thousand*. The number *one* was the ultimate source of the *indefinite article in ME*.

## Articles in ME

## THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE IN ME

was *an/a/o* and was unmarked for gender. The distribution of the form with and without *-n* was as it is in ModE. Since *an* often appeared before words beginning with <h>, we can assume that /h/ was (often) elided. Examples: *on a day* (CT-General Prologue: l. 19); *Noght o word spak he moore than was neede*, “Not a word did he [the Clerk] speak more than was necessary” (ibid.: l. 306); *An horn he bar*, “A horn he [the Yeoman] carried” (ibid.: 116). The possessive forms *myl/myn*; *thyl/thyn* with and without *-n* were governed by the same principle. Examples: *Now, by my fader soule that is deed, / But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow myn heed!* “Now by my father’s soul, who is dead, / But please feel merry; I [the Host] offer you my head [as a guarantee]” (ibid.: ll. 783–784).

## THE DEFINITE ARTICLE IN ME

lost all its inflections in the course of the ME period showing up as the indeclinable article *þe*. The one-time plural definite article *tho* was maintained in the long term as the plural of the distal demonstrative, to which a plural {s} was added giving us *those* (see the **demonstrative in ME**). Note that *the* + a noun beginning with a vowel was frequently contracted as in *thilke* (< *the ilke*). Example: *But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre*, “But **the same** text [the Benedictine Rule] he [the monk] didn’t consider worth an oyster” (CT-General Prologue: l. 182). In similar manner *at the* may contract to *atte*. Example: *The chambres and the stables weren wyde, / And wel we weren esed atte beste*, “The rooms and the stables were large / And we had our ease **at the** best” (ibid.: ll. 28–29).

## THE DEMONSTRATIVES IN ME

lost their inflections for gender and case, but retained the number distinction. The distal form *that* denotes something farther from the speaker, and is derived from the third person neuter nominative and as such has a specifying function. Examples: singular: *Bifil that in that seson, on a day*, “It happened in **that** season in a day” (CT-General Prologue: l. 19); plural: *Out of the gosple he tho wordes caught*, “From the Gospel he took **those** words” (ibid.: l. 500). The proximal form may denote something close to the speaker, but is chiefly used in the CT for textual cohesion. Examples: singular: *Er that I ferther in this tale pace*, “Before I proceed further in **this** tale” (ibid.: l. 36); plural: *And in a glas he hadde pigges bones. / But with thise relikes, whan that he fond / A povre persoun dwellyng upon lond*, “And in a glass he had pigs’ bones. / But with **these** relicts, when he found / a poor parson who lived in the countryside” (ibid.: ll. 702–704).

A further demonstrative can also be found in ME. It is the indeclinable determiner *yon(der)*, which refers to something distant from both speaker and listener. In contrast to *this* and *that*, *yonder* has no function in regard to textual cohesion: it is purely spatial. Example: *The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly / Of hire that rometh in the yonder place*, “The fresh beauty slays me suddenly / Of her who roams in **yonder** place” (CT-Knight’s Tale: ll. 1118–1119). Furthermore, as this example reveals, *yonder* may occur together with the definite article, something which would not be possible with *this* and *that*.

| demonstratives                          | singular        | plural                          |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| proximal (near speaker)                 | <i>this/þis</i> | <i>thisel/þise, thesel/þese</i> |
| distal (near addressee)                 | <i>that/þat</i> | <i>thas/þas, thos/þos</i>       |
| distal (far from speaker and addressee) | <i>yon(der)</i> |                                 |

## Adjectives in ME

if attributive, were placed before the nouns they modified. The first line of the “General Prologue” of the *Canterbury Tales* is an exception made for the sake of rhyme: *Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote* (CT-General Prologue: l. 1). Other cases in which the adjective follows the noun may be explained as expressions (*loan translations*) borrowed from French. Example: *And she was cleped Madame Eglentyne. / Ful weel she song the service dyvyne*, “And she was called Madam Eglentyne. / Very well she sang the **divine service**” (ibid.: ll. 121–122), though the position of *dyvyne* may also be due to the need for a rhyme with *Eglentyne*.

Remnants of inflectional endings show up – though unevenly – in two ways. A final {-e} may appear in (a, b) (and may or may not be pronounced; but if so as unstressed schwa /ə/) or may not appear (c) under the following conditions:

- (a) **after the definite article** *the*, a possessive such as *his*, or a demonstrative determiner; this is known as a weak adjective;
- (b) **if the noun modified is plural**, regardless of whether a determiner precedes or not; **with no preceding definite article, possessive, or demonstrative** this is known as a strong adjective and takes no final -e.

Examples: *Whan Zephirus eek with (a) his sweete breeth / Inspired hath in every holt and heath / The tendre croppes, and (a) the yonge sonne / Hath in the Ram (a) his halfe cours yronne, / And (b) smale foweles maken melodye, / That slepen al the nyght with (c) open eye* (ibid.: ll. 5–10). Example (with a demonstrative): *And whan (a) this goode man saugh that it was so*, “And when this **good** man [the Knight] saw that it was so” (ibid.: l. 852).

- (c) The conditions given in (c) also apply to combinations of an indefinite article + adjective + noun. Example: *a yong SQUIER*, “a **young** squire” (ibid.: l. 79).

The distribution just characterized applies, however, only to monosyllabic adjectives ending in a consonant (which is, in any case, the most common type). This means that *tendre croppes* above is not a suitable example: it is bisyllabic *tendre* whether singular or plural. Note, however, the following example: *The hooly blisful martir* (ibid.: l. 17), where *blisful* does not appear with an additional -e.

| adjectives | number of syllables | strong         | weak           |
|------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|
| singular   | monosyllabic        | <i>god</i>     | <i>gode</i>    |
|            | polysyllabic        | <i>blisful</i> | <i>blisful</i> |
| plural     | monosyllabic        | <i>gode</i>    | <i>gode</i>    |
|            | polysyllabic        | <i>blisful</i> | <i>blisful</i> |

## Adverbs in ME

inasmuch as they were derived from adjectives, took the ending {-e} or {-ly/-liche}. Examples: *Wel koude he sitte on hors, and faire ryde*, “He could sit on a horse well and ride nicely ride” (CT-General Prologue: l. 94); *And specially from every shires ende* (ibid.: l. 15) or: *And have a mantel roialliche ybore*, “And to have their coat carried royally” [about the tradesmen’s] (ibid.: l. 380).

### Comparison of adjectives and adverbs in ME

was much like it is in ModE, though there was sometimes vowel change (ablaut) as in the case of *strong*, *strenger*, *strengest* and *long*, *lenger*, *lengest*. In ModE *old* has the comparative and superlative forms *older*, *oldest*, but *elder* and *eldest* are also sometimes used when referring to brothers and sisters who are older. Adjectives borrowed from French may, but need not, take analytical comparatives and superlatives. Example: *moore* or *moost honorable*. Even adjectives of Germanic origin may form their comparatives and superlatives in this fashion, especially if they consist of more than one syllable. Examples *moore mury* “merrier” (CT-General Prologue: l. 804)

The most prominent irregular forms were

|                                   |                     |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>good, bettre, best</i>         | good, better, best  |
| <i>bade, werse, werste</i>        | bad, worse, worst   |
| <i>muchel, moore, mooste</i>      | much, more, most    |
| <i>litel, lassel/esse, leeste</i> | little, less, least |

Example: *He was the beste beggere in his hous* (ibid.: l. 252)

### Pronouns in ME

The personal pronoun system of ME (Standard Southern Middle English)

| Personal pronouns             | nominative                 | genitive                 | dative-accusative  | reflective        |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| <b>First person singular</b>  | <i>I</i>                   | <i>my/myn(e)</i>         | <i>me</i>          | <i>my self</i>    |
| <b>Second person singular</b> | <i>thou</i>                | <i>thy/thyn(e)/thine</i> | <i>þe/thee</i>     | <i>thy self</i>   |
| <b>Third person singular</b>  | <b>masc.</b> <i>he</i>     | <i>his(e)</i>            | <i>hym/him</i>     | <i>hym self</i>   |
|                               | <b>fem.</b> <i>she</i>     | <i>hir(e)/her(e)</i>     | <i>here/hire</i>   | <i>hir self</i>   |
|                               | <b>neuter</b> <i>(h)it</i> | <i>his(e)</i>            | <i>(h)it</i>       | <i>it self</i>    |
| <b>First person plural</b>    | <i>we</i>                  | <i>ure/oure</i>          | <i>us</i>          | <i>us self</i>    |
| <b>Second person plural</b>   | <i>ye/ȝe/you</i>           | <i>your(e)/ȝower</i>     | <i>you/ȝow/ȝow</i> | <i>ȝoure self</i> |
| <b>Third person plural</b>    | <i>they/hel/heo/ha</i>     | <i>hir(e)</i>            | <i>hem/them</i>    | <i>hem self</i>   |

In contrast to OE the personal pronouns of Middle English reveal a reduced case system – one with essentially the same distinctions found in modern StE. The major differences between the ME and the ModE systems of personal pronouns lies in the continued use of distinct 2nd person pronouns: *thou* (etc.) for the singular and *ye* (etc.) for the plural. ModE makes a singular-plural distinction in the reflective pronouns (i.e. {-self} vs. {-selves}) which was not yet well established in ME. ModE is reintroducing the singular-plural 2nd person differentiation in GenE in the form of *youse*, *you all/y'all*, and *you guys* as new, non-mandatory plural forms.

The **first person singular** capitalized *I* occurs from about 1250 on. The form *ich* also occurs. Examples: with **I**: *In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay / Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage / To Caunterbury with ful devout corage* (CT-General Prologue: ll. 20–22) or with **ich**: *Herkneth to me, gode men - / Wives, maydnes, and alle men - / Of a tale that ich you wile telle* (Havelock the Dane: ll. 1–3).

The **second person singular** is also spelled *thow*. The use of <þ> (thorn) for <th> continues sporadically.

In the **3rd person singular masculine** the dative (*him*) has been generalized to the accusative as a common object case form. The older masculine form *hine* is still retained today in the Southwest of England and in Newfoundland as *ən* (see HoE §10.2.1.3).



The **third person singular feminine** (both in the subject case only) has taken on a distinct subject-case form, viz. *she* (also *sche*, *scho*, or *zho*) for older *heolhelholha* (which continue to occur in older texts). See *HoE* §§3.2.3 and 4.2.3.3 for more. Example: *And she was cleped Madame Eglentyne*, “And she was called ...” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 121).

In the **third person singular neuter** it was the accusative *hit* that was extended to the dative as the new object case. Toward the end of the ME period the initial /h-/ was increasingly lost. Some regional dialects have, however, retained *hit*.

The **first person plural** may have *ure* for *oure* in older texts.

The **second person plural** *ye/ze* has a variety of spellings in the genitive (*zur(e)*, *your(e)*) and accusative *zou*, *eu*, *you*, *ziu*, *yow*.

The **third person plural** has the Northern form with an initial dental fricative *they* (also: *peil/pai*) in the nominative (or subject) case, but also Southern initial /h-/ (nominative *he*, *hi*, *ho*, *hie*). The genitive (or possessive) case is *hir* (also: *here*, *heore*, *hore*) instead of *their*, and the accusative (or object) case is *hem* (also: *ham*, *heom*) instead of *them*. Initial /ð-/ in the possessive (*pair*, *par*) and object cases (*þaim*, *þam*) gradually spread southward. See *HoE* §4.2.3.

### The possessive forms

The genitive case became more and more clearly an indeclinable determiner, as was already commonly the case in OE.

**1st person singular** *myn*, *min* could occur without the *-n*, but could also take a final *-e* when used with plural nouns. Gradually the practice spread of using *my* before words with an initial consonant and *myn* before ones with an initial vowel or <h>: Examples: *Now, by my fader soule that is deed, / But ye be myrie, I wol yeve you myn heed!* “Now by my father’s soul who now is dead, / Be merry, I will give you my head [as a guarantee]!” (*CT-General Prologue*: ll. 783–784).

**2nd person singular** *thyn* is sometimes written without the *-n*, but takes a final *-e* when used with a plural noun. The same practice with following initial vowel and <h> or following consonant became established here as well. Examples: *Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array? /.../ Sire olde lecchour, lat thy japes be!* “Sir Old Sluggard, is that your arrangement? /.../ Sir Old Lecher, let your deceitful ways be” (*CT-Wife of Bath’s Prologue*: ll. 235, 242).

**3rd person singular neuter** has possessive *his*. Example: *Whan that Aprill with hise shoures soote...*, “When April with its sweet showers...” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 1). Modern possessive neuter *its* did not replace *his* until the EModE period.

### Relative pronouns in ME

were chiefly *whos*, *whom*, *which*, *what*, and *that*. The nominative *who* appeared relatively late. In the following example, *who* might be interpreted as a relative or as an interrogative pronoun: *Lat se now who shal telle the firste tale*, “Let’s see now who will tell the first tale” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 833). *Whom* (and *whos*) were restricted to persons, while *which* and *that* were used with both persons and things as antecedents. Examples:

- *who(m)*: *For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste*, “For if a priest be foul in whom we trust,” (ibid.: l. 503);
- *which*: *Of Northfolk was this Reve, of which I telle* (ibid.: l. 621); *For in his male [valise] he hadde a pilwe-beer [pillowcase], / Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl* (ibid.: ll. 696–697).
- *that*: *And smale foweles maken melodye, / That slepen al the nyght with open eye* (ibid.: ll. 9–10); *The hooly blisful martir for to seke / That hem hath holpen* (ibid.: ll. 17–18)



*What* was an indefinite relative, much as in ModE. Example: *Now lat us ryde, and herkneth what I seye*, “Now let us ride and hearken to **what** I say” (ibid.: l. 857). Zero relative was used not only as an object (as in ModE), but also as a subject (only non-standard usage in ModE). Example: *With hym ther was a PLOW-MAN, [Ø] was his brother*, “With him there was a plowman, **who** was his brother” (ibid.: l. 531).

### Interrogatory pronouns in ME

consisted of the same ones we know from ModE: *who, whos, whom, who so, which, welkes, what, and what so*. Examples: *Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?* (CT-Wife of Bath’s Prologue: l. 692); *What maketh this but juppiter, the kyng...?* (CT-Knight’s Tale: l. 3035). In addition, interrogative adjectives occurred much as in ModE as well: *where, how, why*. Examples: *Or where comanded he [God] virginitee?* (CT-Wife of Bath’s Prologue: l. 62); *How manye myghte she have in mariage?* (ibid.: l. 23); *Why is my neighbores wyf so gay?* (ibid.: l. 236).

### Verbs in ME

continued to undergo the process of morphological simplification that had begun in the OE period; yet at the same time there was an expansion of the analytically expressed categories of the verb. We will look first at the morphological features of the ME verb; then, at the expansion in the use of the perfect and the progressive, changes in the expression of the passive, as well as the extension in the use of the modal verbs along with a reduction in the employment of the subjunctive.

### Principal parts

Strong verbs – in ME as in OE and in ModE, where they are referred to as “irregular verbs” – form their past tense and their past participles by means of vowel and inflectional change. This type of vowel change is known as **ablaut** (vowel mutation). Examples: OE *helpan* (infinitive) – *healp* (past singular, 1st and 3rd persons) – *hulpon* (past 2nd person singular and all of the plural) – *(ge)holpen* (past participle) was simplified in ME to *help* – *halp* – *hulpe* – *hōlp(en)*, whereby there are wide-ranging differences in the vowels used from text to text. In standard ModE this verb has become regular (*help* – *helped* – *helped*) with only one past tense form. It remains strong/irregular in some regional dialects.

In ME there continue to be eight classes of strong/irregular verbs as illustrated in the following table (some sources speak of only seven classes, leaving out VII below):

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| I. <i>rīdan</i> – <i>rād</i> – <i>ridon</i> – (y) <i>riden</i>            | “ride”             |
| II. <i>frēosan</i> – <i>frēas</i> – <i>fruron</i> – (y) <i>froren</i>     | “freeze”           |
| III. <i>bindan</i> – <i>band</i> – <i>bundon</i> – (y) <i>bunden</i>      | “bind, tie”        |
| IV. <i>beran</i> – <i>bær</i> – <i>bēron/bēron</i> – (y) <i>boren</i>     | “bear, carry”      |
| V. <i>cwēpan</i> – <i>cwæp</i> – <i>cwēdib/cwēdon</i> – (y) <i>cweden</i> | “speak”            |
| VI. <i>scacan</i> – <i>scōc</i> – <i>scōcon</i> – (y) <i>scacen</i>       | “shake”            |
| VII. <i>hātan</i> – <i>hēt</i> – <i>hēton</i> – (y) <i>hāten</i>          | “order, be called” |
| VIII. <i>haldan</i> – <i>hēold</i> – <i>hēoldon</i> – (y) <i>halden</i>   | “hold”             |

The South had the vowel /o/ in *rōd*, *bond*, and *holdan*/(y)*holden*; elsewhere we find long or short /a/. The /n/ in the endings tended to disappear, esp. in the Midlands. The infinitive ending {an} given above is an older form. More often a simple <-e> will be found, e.g. *rīde*, *binde*, *halde*, etc.

## Tense in ME

From an inflectional point of view ME had two tenses, as continues to be the case in ModE. These were the present and the past (aka preterite). They are given below for the **strong verbs**, the **weak verbs**, and **the verb be(n)**. For the **preterite-present verb paradigm** see the **modal verbs**.

## The strong verbs

have the following endings (illustrated with the class III verb for “sing”):

| <i>The strong verbs</i>       | <i>Present tense indicative</i>  | <i>Past tense indicative</i> |
|-------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| <b>First person singular</b>  | <i>Ilich sing(e)</i>   | <i>song/sang</i>             |
| <b>Second person singular</b> | <i>thou singest</i>  | <i>sung(e)</i>               |
| <b>Third person singular</b>  | <i>he, she, it singes</i> (North)<br><i>singeth</i> (South)  | <i>song/sang</i>             |
| <b>All persons plural</b>     | <i>we, yel/you, they /pei/pai singes</i> (North)<br><i>singen</i> (Midlands)<br><i>singeth</i> (South) | <i>sunge(n)</i>              |

Present tense subjunctive is *sing(e)* in the singular and *singe(n)* in the plural, all persons in both cases. The past subjunctive is *sunge* in the singular and *sunge(n)* in the plural, all persons (see **subjunctive in ME**). There are two participles, the present participle *singende*, *singand(e)*, and *singing(e)* and the past participle (y) *sung(en)*. The imperative is *sing* (singular) and *singes* (North) and *singeþ* (South).

## The weak verbs

formed their past and past participle forms by adding a dental suffix {-t/-d}. Some added {-ede}; others added {-de} or {-te}. This paradigm is illustrated in the following table using the verbs *luvien* for “love” and *have(n)* for “have”:

| <i>The weak verbs</i>         | <i>Present tense indicative</i>  |   | <i>Past tense indicative</i> |                          |
|-------------------------------|--|---|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>First person singular</b>  | <i>Ilich luve</i>  | <i>have</i>                                     | <i>luved(e)</i>              | <i>had / had(d)e</i>     |
| <b>Second person singular</b> | <i>thou luvest</i>   | <i>hæs / havest</i>                             | <i>luvedest</i>              | <i>had / had(d)(e)st</i> |
| <b>Third person singular</b>  | <i>he, she, it luves</i> (North)<br><i>luveth</i> (South)  | <i>haves</i><br><i>haveth</i>                   | <i>luved(e)</i>              | <i>had / had(d)e</i>     |
| <b>All persons plural</b>     | <i>we, yel/you, they/pei/pai</i><br><i>luves</i> (North)<br><i>luve(n)</i> (Midlands)<br><i>luveth</i> (South) | <i>haves</i><br><i>have(n)</i><br><i>haveth</i> | <i>luved(en)</i>             | <i>had / had(d)en</i>    |

Present tense subjunctive is *luve* and *have* in the singular and *luve(n)* and *have(n)* in the plural, all persons in both cases. The past subjunctive is *luved(e)* and *had/had(d)e* in the singular and *luved(en)* and *had(d)e(n)* in the plural, all persons (see **subjunctive in ME**). There are two participles, the present participle, *luvende*, *luvand(e)*, and *luving(e)* and *havende*, *havand(e)*, and *having(e)* and the past participle, (y) *luvet* and *had*. The imperative is *luve* and *have* (singular) and *luves* and *haves* (North) and *luveth* and *haveth* (South).

### The verb be(n)

is irregular, as it is in ModE as well. The following table gives its forms:

| <i>The verb be(n)</i>         | <i>Present tense indicative</i>   | <i>Past tense indicative</i>    |
|-------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| <b>First person singular</b>  | <i>I/ich am/em/be</i>   | <i>was/wes</i>                  |
| <b>Second person singular</b> | <i>thou art/ert/es/best</i>   | <i>was/wore/were/wast/weore</i> |
| <b>Third person singular</b>  | <i>he, she, it es/is/ys/be(o)th</i>   | <i>was/wes</i>                  |
| <b>All persons plural</b>     | <i>we, ye/you, they are</i> (North)<br><i>arn</i> (Midlands)<br><i>es/be(o)th</i> (South) | <i>wer/war(e)/were(n)</i>       |

Present tense subjunctive is *be* /*si(e)* in the singular and *be* and *ben* in the plural, all persons in both cases. The past subjunctive is *war(e)/were* in the singular and *war(e)/were(n)* in the plural, all persons (see **subjunctive in ME**). There are two participles, the present participle *beand(e)* and *being* and the past participle *ben/(y)be(n)*. The imperatives are *be* (singular) and *bes/beth* (plural).

### The future in ME

was most commonly expressed by the simple present. Examples:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>He seyde, "Syn I <b>shal</b> bigynne the game,</i>                   | <i>shal</i> : modal of obligation; necessarily refers to the future; |
| <i>He said, "Since I am to begin the game,</i>                          | <i>wil</i> also had future force, but suggesting wish or want        |
| <i>What, welcome <b>be</b> the cut, * a Goddes name!</i>                | <i>be</i> : subjunctive; expresses a wish (= future)                 |
| <i>What then, welcome may the cut be, in God's name</i>                 |  |
| <i>Now <b>lat</b> us ryde, and <b>herkneth</b> what I <b>seye</b>."</i> | <i>lat</i> : causative-suggestive; action suggested is future        |
| <i>Now let us ride, and listen to what I say."</i>                      | <i>herkneth</i> : imperative plural; action demanded is future       |
|   | <i>seye</i> : simple present; the saying is to come (= future)       |

*And with that word we ryden forth oure weye,  
And with that word we rode forth on our way.  
And he bigan with right a myrie cheere  
And he began with right merry cheer  
His tale anon, and seyde as ye **may** heere.  
His tale in a moment, and told it as you may hear.*

*may*: modal of possibility; necessarily refers to the future

(CT-General Prologue, ll. 855–860)

\* The pilgrims drew straws to see who (the one with the shortest straw) would begin with his/her tale.

### Mood and modality in ME

When making conditional statements the subjunctive or modal verbs were used, as will be elaborated in the following.

### The subjunctive in ME

continued to be used as mentioned under **principal parts**. It was used, for example, to express conditions contrary to fact, cf. *She wolde **wepe**, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe, if it **were** deed or bledde*, "She

**would weep** if she saw a mouse / Caught in a trap if it **were** dead or bled” (about the Prioress in *CT-General Prologue*, ll. 144–145). This quotation also illustrates the use of a modal verb (*wolde*) to express an unreal condition. In general, the use of the subjunctive had begun to be reduced and be replaced by analytic forms (*modal auxiliary* + verb).

### The modal verbs in ME

developed out of the *preterite-present verbs*. When used in the present tense, they tend to have future-like reference; in the past tense form they may refer to past time or to unreal situations. The following are the major modal verbs:

|                        | Present tense indicative   | Past tense indicative                             |
|------------------------|--|---|
| First person singular  | <i>I wol, wil / kan / may / mo(o)t / shal</i>                                      | all person except the 2nd singular:               |
| Second person singular | <i>thou wolt, wilt / kanst / mayst / mo(o)st / shalt</i>                           | <i>wolde(n) / koude myghtel / mostel / sholde</i> |
| Third person singular  | <i>helshe wol, wil / kan / may / mo(o)t / shal</i>                                 | the 2nd person singular                           |
| All persons plural     | <i>wel / ye / they wol(len), wil / konne(n) / may or mowen / mo(o)te(n) / shal</i> | <i>woldest / myghtest / sholdest</i>              |

- **wol** – “will, want.” Examples: present tense: *And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne*, “And with a knight than I **will** first begin” (*CT-General Prologue*, l. 42); past tense: *and pilgrymes were they alle, / That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde*, “and pilgrims were they all, / That **wanted** to ride toward Canterbury” (ibid.: ll. 26–27);
- **kan** – “know, know how.” Examples: present tense: *Eek Plato seith, whoso kan hym rede, / The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede*, “Plato, too, has said, whoever **can** / **knows how** to read him, / The words **must** be cousin (= related) to the deed” (ibid.: ll. 743–744); past tense *In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe*, “In fellowship she **could** well laugh and chat” (ibid.: l. 476 about the Wife of Bath);
- **may** – “be able to.” Examples: present tense: *My wit is short, ye may wel understonde* (ibid.: l. 748); past tense: *And whan he rood, men myghte his brydel here*, “And when he rode, people **were able to** hear his bridle” (ibid.: l. 169 about the Monk);
- **mo(o)t** – “must, have to.” Examples: present tense: *As evere mote I drynke wyn or ale, / Whoso be rebel to my juggement / Shal paye for al that by the wey is spent*, “As I **must** always drink wine or ale, / Whoever rebels against my judgment / Shall pay for all that is spent along the way” (ibid.: ll. 834–836); past tense, but without past reference: *And telle he moste his tale, as was resoun, / By foreward and by composicioun, / As ye han herd, what nedeth wordes mo?* “And he **had to** tell his tale, as was reasonable, / By agreement and by promise / you have heard, what words are still needed?” (ibid.: ll. 849–851);
- **shal** – “should”; also future; *sholte* unreal. Examples: present tense: *if gold ruste, what shal iren do?* “If gold **rust**, what **will** iron do?” (ibid.: l. 502); past tense, but without past reference: *In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon / That to the offrynge before hire sholde goon*, “In all the parish there was no woman / Who **might** go to the offering ahead of her” (ibid.: ll. 451–452).

In addition to the modal verbs listed a few other verbs follow this pattern, e.g. “know” (*woot / woost / woot / witen* and past *wiste*).

### Voice in ME

The passive was formed using the auxiliary *be* + the past participle and no longer, as in OE, with either *been* “be” or *weorpan* “become.” Examples: *And wel we weren esed atte beste*, “And we **were put** well at ease with

the best” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 29). Or: *At Alisaundre he was, whan it **was wonne***, “At Alexandria he was, when it **was taken**” (ibid.: l. 51 about the knight).

### Aspect in ME

#### *The perfect in ME*

cannot be equated with the (present) perfect in ModE since it does not carry the meaning of current relevance. In ME the combination of the auxiliaries *have* and *be* with the past participle were alternative ways of expressing past happenings or states. Example: *That hem **hath holpen**, whan that they were seeke*, “Who **helped** them when they were sick” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 18). The choice of the auxiliary was largely determined by the main verb. If this verb was transitive as in the example just quoted, *haue* was used. Although *haue* gradually supplanted *ben* in the course of the ME period, if the main verb was intransitive as is *come*, *ben* was still frequent. Example: *At nyght **was come** into that hostelrye / Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye / Of sondry folk, ...*, “At night into the hostel **came** / All in all twenty nine in a company / of sundry people” (ibid.: ll. 23–25). See also *verb-final word order in ME*.

#### *The progressive in ME*

was not fully developed. In the *Canterbury Tales* we find the following example, which appears to function much as the ModE progressive does: *Syngynge he was, or floytynge, al the day*, “Singing he was, or playing the flute all day” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 91 about the knight’s son, the squire).

### Prepositions and case in ME

The objects of prepositions no longer took different cases as they had in the OE period. This was one of the results of the loss of case distinctions (other than the genitive/possessive) in the noun. The *personal pronouns*, which continued to mark the cases more elaborately than the noun, no longer distinguished the dative from the accusative. Consequently, prepositions were followed by nouns unmarked for case or by personal pronouns and relative *who* marked for the object case; demonstrative and indefinite pronouns, as well as relative and interrogatory pronouns (excluding *who*) took no case. Increasingly the old genitive was marked by the use of *of*. Example: *The droghte **of March*** (ibid.: l. 1). The dative, by *to* or *for*. Examples: of *to*: *Me thynketh it acordaunt **to** resound*, “I think it is appropriate **to** reason” (ibid.: l. 37); for *for*: ***For** hym was levere have at his beddes heed / Twenty bookes*, “It was preferable **for** him to have at the head of his bed / Twenty books” (ibid.: 295–296). The old instrumental case was now replaced by the preposition *by*. Example: *And every statut koude he pleyne **by** rote*, “And every statute he could plead **by** rote memory” (ibid.: 329).

### Conjunctions in ME

differed from those of ModE chiefly in the use of *that* together with conjunctions which no longer take *that* in present-day usage.

- *er that* “before” Example: ***Er that** I ferther in this tale pace*, “**Before** I proceed further in this tale” (*CT-General Prologue*: l. 36); without *that*: *Yet wolde he have a ferthyng, **er** he wente*, “Yet he wanted to have a farthing **before** he went” (ibid.: l. 257 about the Friar);

- **how that** “how” Example: *Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive, / By his clenness, how that his sheep sholde lyve*, “Well ought a priest to give an example of how to live / By his cleanliness, **how** his flock should live” (ibid.: ll. 507–508); without *that*: *I noot how men hym calle*, “I do not know **how** (= what) people called him” (ibid.: l. 286 about the Marchant);
- **when that** “when” *whan that they were seeke* (ibid.: l. 18); without *that*: *Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth / Inspired hath in every holt and heath / The tendre croppes ...* (ibid.: l. 5–7);
- **whil that** “while” *Ful many a draughte of wyn had he ydrawe / Fro Bordeaux-ward, whil that the chapman sleep*, “Very many a draught of wine he had drawn / From Bordeaux **while** the chapman slept” (ibid.: ll. 398–399); without *that*: *But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space ...*, “But nonetheless **while** I have time and space...” (ibid.: l. 35);
- **which that** “which” *He which that hath the shorteste shal bigynne*, “He **who** has the shortest shall begin” (ibid.: l. 838); without *that*: *Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun / To telle yow al the condicioun / Of ech of hem, so as it semed me, / And whiche they weren, and of what degree, / And eek in what array that they were inne*, “I think it is appropriate to resound / To tell you all the condition / Of each of them, as it seemed to me / And **who** they were and of what estate, / And also what array they were in” (ibid.: ll. 37–41);
- **so that** “so that” [he] *kepte wel his folde, / So that the wolfe ne made it nat miscarie*, “[he] kept his fold [of sheep] well, / **So that** the wolf did not make it them miscarry” (ibid.: ll. 514–515); *so* does not appear as a conjunction without *that*.

## ME vocabulary

### Sources of new words

The vocabulary of ME underwent enormous changes in comparison to that of OE. These changes were due, more than anything else, to significant borrowing from three major and one minor source. Old Norse (ON) provided a large number of new words that probably entered the language in the OE period, but which did not show up in writing until the ME period. Words of ON origin were commonplace designations for everyday things and actions with a special predisposition toward words from the areas of war and of maritime activity. All in all, some 400 ON words were added to what would someday be StE, and another 2000 appear as Nordicisms in the traditional dialects of the North and the Eastern Midlands. Examples of vocabulary from ON as listed in *HoE*, §3.2.1 include everyday words (given in ModE): *get*, *give*, and *take*; *dirt*, *dregs*, and *mire*; *nag*, *call*, and *scowl*; *guess*, *want*, and *thrive*, farm and animal terms such as *axletree*, *bull*, *down* (feathers), and *egg* as well as words for bodily features: *freckles*, *leg*, and *skin*, even *birth*, *slaughter*, and *die*; *fellow*, *husband*, and *sister*. Examples of terms from the area of war and sailing: *barda* “beaked ship”; *cne-arr* “small ship or galley”; *lip* “fleet”; *scegmenn* “pirate”; *dreng* “warrior”; *båtswegen* “boatman, boatswain”; *orrest* “battle”; *rān* “robbery”; and *rannsaka* “ransack.”

The second language, French, contributed even more words to the English as a result of the Norman Conquest (see *HoE*, Chapter 4). The French language, whether Norman French or Central French (of the region around Paris), was spoken widely at the top of society from 1066 until well into the thirteenth century. In a transitional French-English bilingual period running from about 1200 to 1250 English became the usual language of many of this group of speakers, who carried over into English a significant number of French words pertaining especially to the following areas (with examples; careful: spellings often varied):

- **fashion**: *frok* “frock,” *goune* “gown,” *petycote* “petticoat”;
- **art and literature**: *beaute* “beauty,” *musique* “music,” *peynture* “painting,” *poesie* “poetry,” *storie* “story”;



- **learning:** *gramere* “grammar,” *logyk* “logic,” *phisik* “medicine,” *studie* “study”;
- **law:** *juree* “jury,” *peyne* “pain, penalty,” *prisun* “prison,” *sentence* “sentence,” *verdit* “verdict”;
- **administration and government:** *administren* “administer,” *coroune* “crown,” *court* “court,” *gouverne* “govern,” *parlement* “parliament,” *realme* “realm,” *roial* “royal,” *stat* “state”;
- **military:** *armee* “army,” *batel* “battle,” *navie* “navy,” *pees* “peace,” *sege* “siege”;
- **church:** *baptisme* “baptism,” *chapelain* “chaplain,” *peregrine* “pilgrim,” *persoun* “parson,” *sarcement* “sacrament,” *sermoun* “sermon.”

The third language of importance for the growth and development of English was Latin, which continued to be widely used in the church and as the language of public record. In the EModE period renewed borrowing from Latin was to take place. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between borrowings from Latin and from French. However, when a word like *Aprill* (ibid. l. 1) appears it is probable that its origin in Latin *Aprilis mensis* rather than Old French *avrill*.

There was also significant, though not large-scale borrowing from Dutch (including Low German). This may be accounted for as a result of the lively commercial activities across the North Sea, and this shows up in the many borrowings from shipping, e.g. *bowe*, *bowgh* “bow” and *bouspret* “bowsprit,” *dekke* “deck,” *dokke* “dock,” *fraught* “freight,” *groot* “groat,” *gilder* “guilder,” and “rover” from *roven* “rob.”

### Structure of ME vocabulary

The large-scale borrowing which took place in the ME period led, in the long run, to major restructuring in the vocabulary of English. This came in part at the expense of native Germanic words which grew obsolete, words such as *forecwedere* “prophet,” literally “fore-sayer”; *ealdmodor* “granddame,” literally “old mother”; and *æpeling* “prince” (see *HoE*, Table 4.4 in 4.2.4).

By the end of the ME period 28.3% of the vocabulary was of French origin according to entries in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (first published in 1933 as a more concise version of the OED); 28.24% came from Latin; and 27% were Germanic (Finkenstaedt and Wolff 1973: 121–128). Of the French borrowings it is estimated that 20% entered English before 1450 and that these are among those with the highest rate of use (Bailey and Maroldt 1977: 32).

Furthermore, where native English words were not displaced, synonyms at different levels of style emerged and became characteristic of the stylistic differentiation at least in part possible in English. There are, for example, some cases of Germanic-French-Latin triplets like *rise–mount–ascent*; *ask–question–interrogate*; *fast–firm–secure*; *fire–flame–conflagration*; *holy–sacred–consecrated*; and *time–age–epoch*, whereby the Germanic word is frequently the everyday word, the French one, more formal, and the Latin one, learned or even bookish.

Finkenstaedt, T. and D. Wolff (1973) *Ordered Profusion. Studies in Dictionaries and the English Lexicon*. Heidelberg: Winter.

Bailey, C.-J. N. and K. Maroldt (1977) “The French Lineage of English” In: J.M. Meisel (ed.) *Langues en contact – Pidgins – Creoles – Language in Contact*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 21–53.

### Dictionaries of ME

The following are a selection of on-line glossaries of ME with a short commentary:

<http://www.librarius.com/cantales.htm>

This glossary consists of single-word entries, only occasionally with alternative spellings. Grammatical information follows with notation of the part of speech and, where appropriate, further morphological



information such as singular or plural; past tense or past participle. The gloss is usually a one-word translation into ModE, but sometimes an explanation. Approximately 1900 entries.

<http://www.cyberstudia.com/ogmios/texts/hary/hary-glossary.html>

This is a comprehensive glossary of Old Scots based on the ME (= Old Scots) texts of *The Bruce* (the 1370s) and *Wallace* (c. 1477). The entries are frequently given with spelling alternatives. A simple one-word ModE gloss is supplied. No grammatical or morphological information is offered. [This edition copyright © 2000 Ogmios Press (all rights reserved)]

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10625/10625-h/main.html>

This on-line version of A.L. Mayhew and W.W. Skeat's *A Concise Dictionary of Middle English* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888) is, in fact, the most comprehensive of the three listed here. The whole work is extensively prefaced. Under any one of the head words the entries give a wide selection of alternative spellings, each with exemplary sources. Not only are the entries glossed, they are also accompanied with grammatical information and cross-references to related entries. The etymological source (e.g. OE, Anglo-French, Low Latin, or Old High German) is indicated. Abbreviations give the sources relied on for the words cited, which come from almost 70 different works: The material encompasses the individual glossaries of 18 works of Early ME (1150–1300), 20 from the middle ME period (1298–1393), and 28 from the Late ME and some of the EModE period (1394–1579). There are an estimated 11 to 12 thousand entries. See exemplary entries under *The alphabet in ME*.