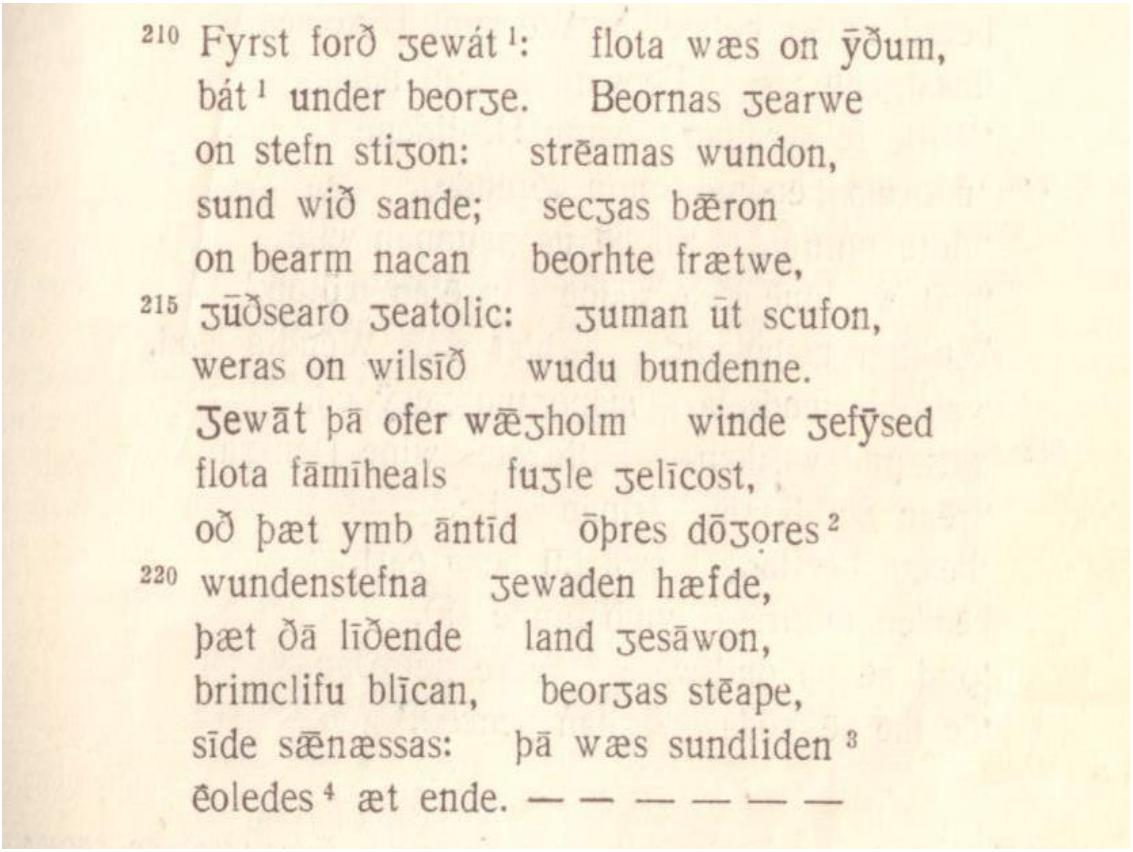
Spelling Changes in Middle English

The Influence of the French Language on Middle English Spelling

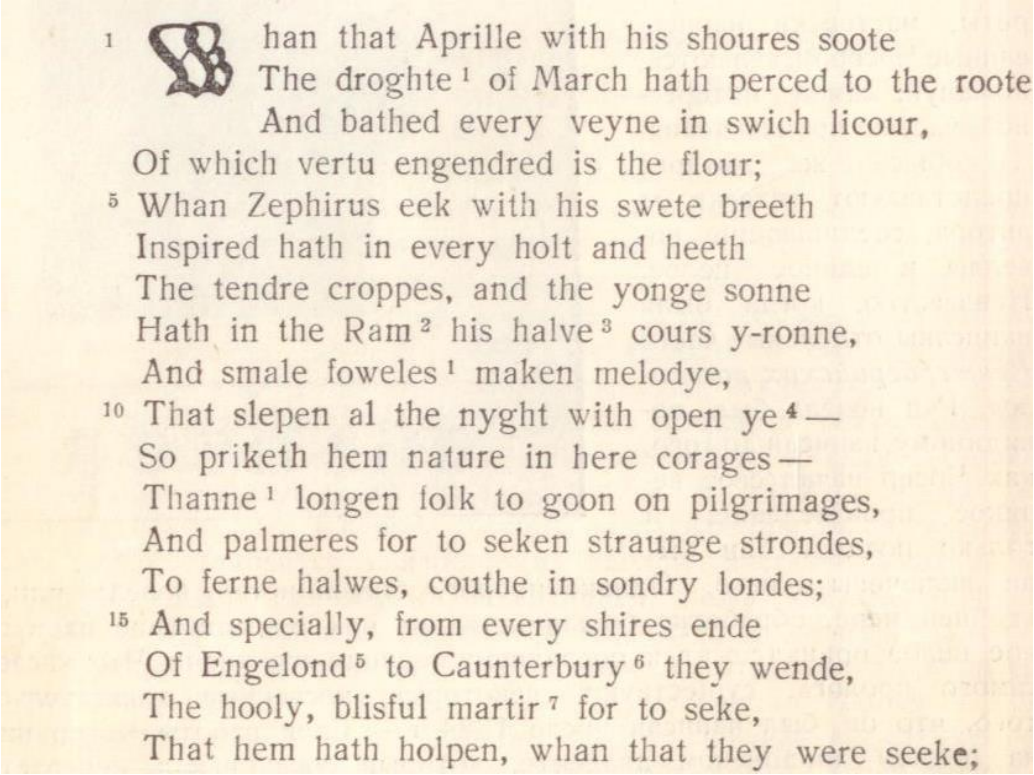
The most conspicuous feature of Late ME texts in comparison with OE texts is the difference in spelling. The written forms of the words in Late ME texts resemble their modern forms, though the pronunciation of the words was different. Below are given samples of OE and ME texts (see pictures 1 and 2).



210 Fyrst forð ȝewát[1]: flota wæs on ȳðum,
bát[1] under beorȝe. Beornas ȝearwe
on stefn stiȝon: strēamas wundon,
sund wið sande; secȝas bǣron
on bearm nacan beorhte frætwe,
215 ȝūðsearo ȝeatolic: ȝuman ūt scufon,
weras on wilsīð wudu bundenne.
Ȝewāt þā ofer wǣȝholm winde ȝefȳsed
flota fāmīheals fuȝle ȝelīcost,
oð þæt ymb āntīd ōþres dōȝores[2]
220 wundenstefna ȝewaden hæfde,
þæt ðā līðende land ȝesāwon,
brimclifu blīcan, beorȝas stēape,
sīde sǣnæssas: þā wæs sundliden[3]
ēoledes[4] æt ende. — — — — — —

Picture 1. Sample of OE text, a passage from Beowulf.

In the course of ME many new devices were introduced into the system of spelling; some of them reflected the sound changes which had been completed or were still in progress in ME; others were graphic replacements of OE letters by new letters and digraphs.



Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
The droghte[1] of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram[2] his halve[3] cours y-ronne,
And smale foweles[1] maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye[4] —
So priketh hem nature in here corages —
Thanne[1] longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;
And specially, from every shires ende
Of Engelond[5] to Caunterbury[6] they wende,
The hooly, blisful martir[7] for to seke,
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke;

Picture 2. Sample of ME text, opening lines from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

After the period of Anglo-Norman dominance (11th—13th c.) English regained its prestige as the language of writing, though for a long time writing was in the hands of those who had a good knowledge of French. Therefore many innovations in ME spelling reveal an influence of the French scribal tradition.

1. Insular Minuscule Script was replaced by the Continental Minuscule Script, as a result of the French influence. Consequently, the specific OE letter **ȝ** falls into disuse and is replaced by its continental counterpart **g.** Continental **g** renders two sounds in ME: [g] before back vowels and [dȝ] before front vowels. The OE letter **ȝ** is still used in early ME, but it is more curved **3** and renders the sounds [j] at the beginning of a word and [X].
In the late ME the curved **3** finally falls into disuse. At the beginning of words it is replaced by **y**, e.g. young, yard, year; as for the soung [X], from the late ME it is rendered by the digraph **gh**, e.g. light [lixt], night [nixt], right [rixt].

2. The Runic letter **Þ** falls into disuse and is replaced by the digraph – **th**.

3. Under the French influence, the letters **j k v q** are added to the English alphabet.

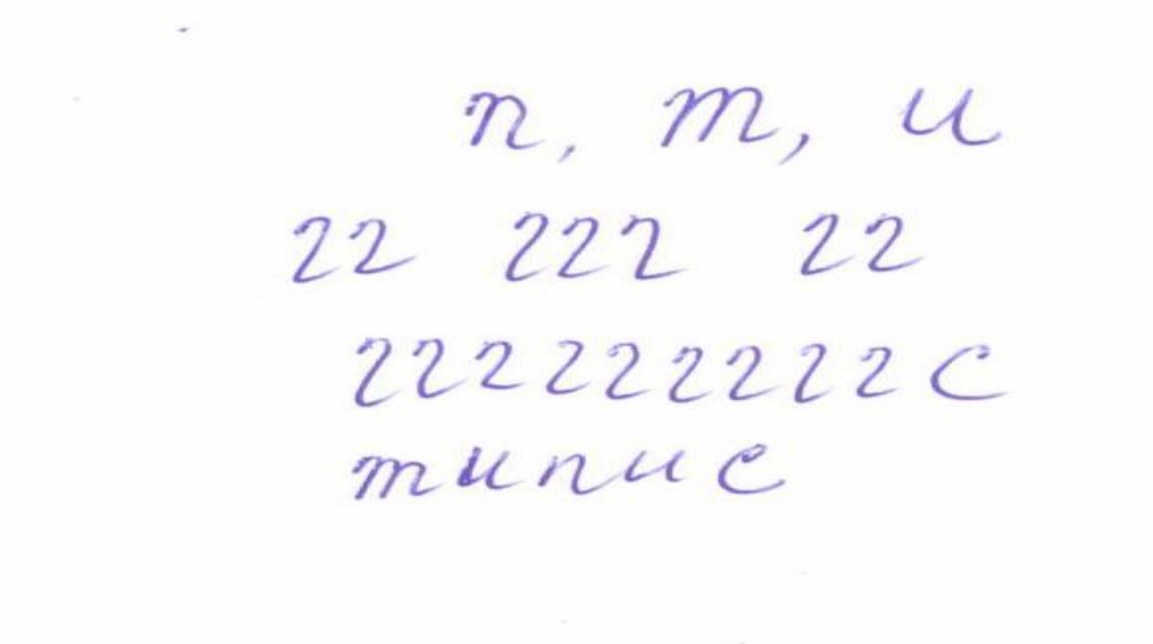
4. Another French influence is the two-fold reading of the letters **g** and **c.**
g [g] [ʤ]
c [k] [s]

Before back vowels they are pronounced as [g] and [k], before front vowels as [ʤ] and [s], e.g. geography, ice.

5. After the introduction of the letter **v** in ME, **f** is no more voiced in an inter-vocal position. Thus, **f** renders voiceless fricative [f] and **v** voiced fricative sound [v]. It should be mentioned that in ME and NE texts the use of **v** and **u** is often confused and only after the orthographic reform of the XVII c. the use of ***u*** and ***v*** is finally normalized.

6. **Y** became an equivalent of **[i]** at the end of a word, e.g. boy, toy, lorry, trolley …

7. Some replacements were probably made to avoid confusion of resembling letters: thus ***o*** was employed not only for [o] but also to indicate short [u]. It happened when ***u*** stood close to ***n, m,*** or ***v,*** for they were all made up of down strokes and were hard to distinguish in a hand-written text (see picture 3).
That is how OE *munuc* became ME *monk,* though it was pronounced as [munk] and OE *lufu* became ME *love* [luve] (NE *monk, love).* This replacement was facilitated, if not caused, by the similar use of the letter **o** in Anglo-Norman.



Picture 3.

8. ME is characterized by wide use of digraphs. Digraph **ou** is borrowed from French to indicate **long u [u:]**.
E.g. **ou – [u:]**
OE hūs – ME hous [hu:s]
OE ūt – ME out [u:t]
OE mūs – ME mous [mu:s]

Another French digraph **ie** is regularly employed in ME to render **long e [e:]** e.g. chief [tʃe:f] thief [θe:f].

9. More digraphs are used in ME to render the newly developed sounds:
ch – [tʃ]
e.g. OE cild [kild] – ME child [tʃild]
sh [ʃ]
e.g. OE scip [skip] – ME ship [ʃɪp]
dg [dʒ].

10. The OE sequence of letters **hw** is replaced by **wh**, but it is still pronounced as [hw],
e.g. OE hwæt – ME what [hwat]

11. OE long vowels are replaced by double letters:
e.g.

OE fōt – ME foot [fo:t]
OE bōc – ME book [bo:k]
OE tōþ – ME tooth [to:θ]
OE fēt – ME feet [fe:t]

Picture 4 summarises the peculiarities of spelling in Late ME. It includes the new letters and digraphs introduced in ME and the new sound values of some letters in use since the OE period (the other letters of the English alphabet were employed in the same way as before).

Peculiarities of Middle English Spelling

Letters indicating vowels	Letters indicating consonants
Single letters	
a [a]	*c* [s] or [k]
y, as well as *i* [i]	*f* [f]
o [o] or [u]	*g* [dʒ] or [g]
	j [dʒ]
	k [k]
	s [s] or [z]
	v (often spelt as *u*) [v]
	y [j]
Digraphs	
ee [e:] or [ɛ:]	*ch*, *tch* [tʃ]
ie [e:]	*dg* [dʒ]
oo [o:] or [ɔ:]	*gh* [x] or [x']
ou [u:] or [ou]	*qu* [kw]
ow [u:] or [ou]	*th* [θ] or [ð]
	sh, *sch*, *ssh* [ʃ]
	wh [hw]

Picture 4.