

## THE DIALECTS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

### I. An age of literary dialects

#### I.1 *The regional flavour*

When it is his turn to speak, the Parson of the *Canterbury Tales* declines to tell a story in verse, offering instead a prose treatise on confession and capital sins. The reason he adduces is also geographical (Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* X.42-4):

But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man:	believe me
I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf’, by lettre,	tell a story in alliterative verse
Ne, Good woot, rym holde I but litel better.	nor knows rhyme consider

Alliterative poetry had its own specialised vocabulary embedded in the dialects of the north and the north midlands; but even though it was not native to the south, it was appreciated also in the south, as is witnessed by manuscript production.

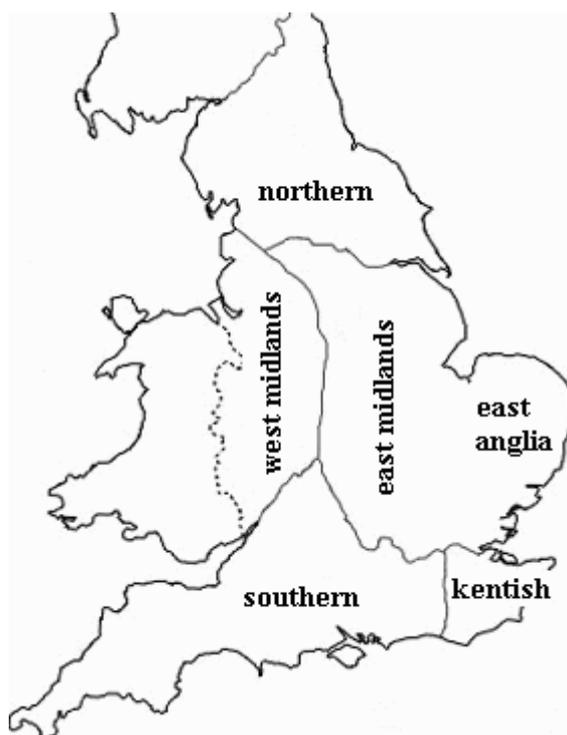
All Middle English literature (1100-1500) comes in dialectal varieties. A national written standard emerged in the second half of the 15th century, and only then did the dialects lose their literary status.

#### I.2 *Dialect areas*

Middle English is a continuum of regional variation, and “we have good written evidence for well over a thousand dialectally differentiated varieties of later Middle English” (McIntosh, “Word Geography”, p. 86).

The major dialect areas are:

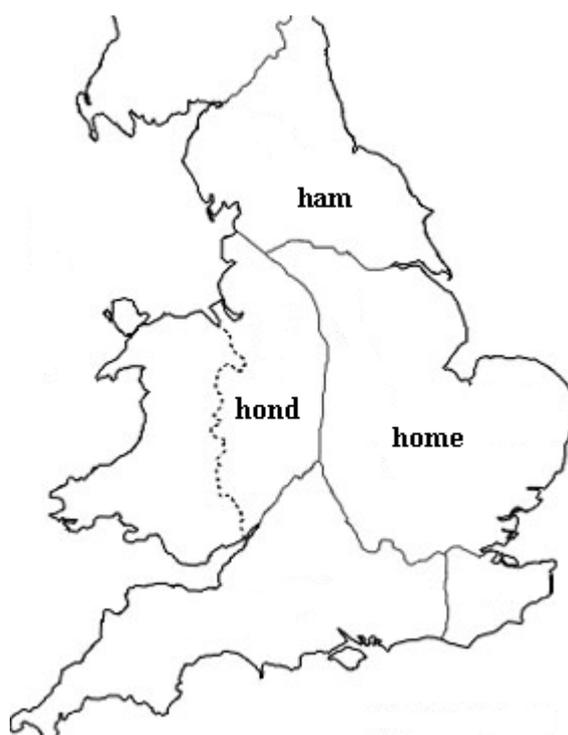
- southeastern (Kentish)
- southwestern (ranging westward from west Surrey and Hampshire)
- northern (ranging from mid Yorkshire northward into Scotland)
- east midlands (southeast midlands, northeast midlands)
- west midlands (southwest midlands, northwest midlands)
- East Anglia



Here are some of the phonological, morphological and lexical indicators.

Old English long *a* appears as <a> in northern dialects (*ham* 'home') and as <o> in texts from south Lincolnshire southward (*home*).

Old English *a* before nasals appears as <o> in west midland texts (*hond* 'hand') and gains a wider distribution (also in Chaucer, a Londoner).



Present participle:

*-and(e)* in the north and north midlands (from Old Norse *-andi*)

*-end(e)* south midlands, *-ind(e)* south

*-ing(e)*, *-yng(e)* by 1350 in the southeast midlands and East Anglia.

Past participle prefix:

*i-*, *y-* in southern, south and west midland texts.



Present tense inflections:

the *-s* ending for 3rd singular originated in the north (used also in plural forms)

*-th*, *-þ* usually used in the south for singular and plural forms

*-th* in 3rd singular and *-en* in plural forms in midland texts.



The third person plural pronoun (*they*, *them*, *their*) is a Scandinavian borrowing into northern or north midland dialects, from where it spread southward. By Chaucer's time (late fourteenth century) the *th-* form has been adopted in London for the subject case only, whereas the oblique cases remain in the native form (*hem*, *here*).

Also the third-person singular feminine *sche*, *scho* spread from the north and the midlands.

### 1.3 *The regional flavour again*

Some of the dialectal differences between areas are exemplified in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, where two students from the north interact with a miller from near Cambridge, where the story is set.

	<i>students</i>	<i>miller</i>
'both'	bathe	bothe
'fro'	fra	fro
'no'	na	no

'two'	twa	two
'go'	ga	gon
'goes'	gas	goth
'such'	swilk	swich
'which'	whilk	whiche

The students also say

banes ('bones'), lang ('long'), wrang ('wrong')

and use a number of words of Scandinavian origin

ille ('bad'), hethyng ('scorn'), thair ('their', instead of *here*), til ('to'), ymel ('among').

While the native verb *hope* has the meaning of its Scandinavian cognate – 'think, believe' (so also in *Gawain*). Add to this that the narrator, the reeve, is from Norfolk (East Anglia), and a feature of his dialect is the form *Ik* for 'I', which he uses in the prologue to the tale.

The scribes who copied the tale behaved differently: some of them replaced northern forms with southern equivalents, others increased the number of northernisms (Horobin).

#### I.4 *Authors and scribes*

And for ther is so gret diversite	since
In Englissh and in wrytyng of oure tonge,	
So prey I God that non myswrite the,	none thee (i.e. the work)
Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge	nor

Thus Chaucer's envoi at the end of his *Troilus and Crideyde* (V.1793-6). In the process of transmission texts are at the mercy of the accuracy and aims of successive scribes.

A scribe copying a manuscript which is in a dialect different from his own may do one of three things (McIntosh, "Word Geography", p. 92):

- A. He may leave the original more or less unchanged: this happens rarely;
- B. He may convert it into his own kind of language, making modifications to the orthography, the morphology, and the vocabulary: this happens commonly, and is dialect translation;
- C. He may do something somewhere between A and B: this also happens commonly, and produces a composite language, a *Mischsprache*.

When copying poetry, the scribe usually refrains from making changes that would destroy rhyme, alliteration, or rhythmical pattern. The words or forms thus retained point to the author's dialect. Thus M. L. Samuels ("Langland's Dialect") has identified Langland's dialect, previously deemed not recoverable from the manuscripts, by studying the alliteration of *Piers Plowman*, and finding that for 'she' *heo* alliterates more frequently than *sche*, for 'are' *ar(e)n* alliterates as well as *b*-forms (*bep*, *beop*, *bup*, *ben*), *f* alliterates with *v* (voicing), and that *h*- with initial vowels alliterates: these features could co-occur only in southwest Worcestershire.

### I.5 *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*

The *Atlas*, or LALME, covers the period 1350-1450 and makes use of 280 linguistic items, or variables, to map the dialectal varieties of late written Middle English, with their overlapping distributions (“dialectal continuum”). The *Atlas* applies the *fit*-technique to localize manuscripts whose provenance is unknown: it places the manuscript in the area that *fits* its linguistic profile, or in the neighbourhood of already localized texts. Thus Angus McIntosh has located the romance of *Havelok* in Norfolk, instead of Lincolnshire, by the co-occurrence of such forms as *hem* and *here* (instead of those with *th-*, *þ-*), *michele* (instead of *mikele*), present participle *-inde* (instead of *-ande*).

### I.6 *Diachronic change and diatopic variation*

Early literary texts of the first half of the 13th century such as the *Brut* and *The Owl and the Nightingale* have inflectional morphology (the definite article inflects for case, number and gender), grammatical gender and a lexis that is mostly Old English in origin. When we pass to Chaucer and the Arthurian romances of the second half of the 14th century, inflection has disappeared (*the* is the indeclinable article), natural gender is the norm and the lexis is highly composite (Old English, Old French and Old Norse).

	<i>Owl</i>	<i>Brut</i>	<i>Gawain</i>	Chaucer
the	<i>m.</i> þe, þane, þas, þan	þe, þene, þas, þan	þe	the
	<i>f.</i> þo, þare	þa, þere	þe	the
	<i>n.</i> þat	þat	þe	the
gender	grammatical	grammatical	natural	natural
they, them, their	hi, hom, hore	heo, heom, heore	þay, hem, hor	they, hem, here
verbs				
pres.3s	-eþ	-eð	-(e)s, -(e)z, -tz	-eth
pres.3pl	-eþ	-eð	-(e)n, -e	-e(n)
pres. part.	-inde	-inde	-ande	-ing
verbal noun	-ing	-ing	-ing	-ing
past-part. prefix	i-	i-		(i-)
lexis	OE	OE	OE, OF, ON	OE, OF
century	13th	13th	14th	14th
area	South East	South-West Midlands	North-West Midlands	London

The change was not uniform: it seems to have been most rapid in the east and the north; the south and the southwest midlands were more conservative.

The composite lexicon is a contact phenomenon. Since the Norman Conquest of 1066 England had been a bilingual country, with the court speaking French. Another type of bilingualism had been present in Anglo-Saxon England when, from the second half of the 9th century on, the Scandinavians settled in the north and the northeast midlands (the Scandinavian belt: north and eastern Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire). They were progressively assimilated; and what is striking about the Scandinavian component of the Middle English lexicon is its delayed emergence in the written language – and its diffusion southward.

The French, and generally Latin, component has remained conspicuous in English, numerically and stylistically (“this my hand will rather / the multitudinous seas incarnadine, / making the green one red”, *Macbeth* II.ii.60-2).

The Scandinavian legacy is much smaller and unobtrusive, but involves grammatical words like *they*, high-frequency words like *take* and pronunciations like /grv/ instead of /jrv/ for *give* (cp. *yield*)

The innovations usually follow the north-south direction, which will be reversed in the diffusion of the national standard, which will reach the north very late.

## II. *Gawain, Alliterative Morte, Stanzaic Morte, Malory*

### II.1 *Manuscripts and dialect areas*

The language of the scribe of the *Gawain* manuscript fits “a very small area either in SE Cheshire or just over the border in NE Staffordshire” (McIntosh, “A New Approach”, p. 25), in the northwest midlands. It is dialectally homogeneous, apart from a few minor differences in the treatment, for instance, of final *-e* and <qu> alliterating with <w> (G 1186), which might indicate that the author’s dialect came from further south in Staffordshire (Duggan, pp. 240-242). The Pennine uplands between Cheshire, Staffordshire and Derbyshire have evidently inspired the rugged landscapes of the poem, and place-names like Knar and Knotbury recall topographic terms used in the poem – *knarre* (G 721, 1434, 2166), *knot* (G 1431, 1434) (Elliott).

The manuscript of the *Alliterative Morte* is an example of *Mischsprache*. Its copyist, Robert Thornton (c. 1440), was from Yorkshire and he superimposed a layer of northern forms on an exemplar which came from southwest Lincolnshire (northeast midlands). His exemplar must have been itself a copy from somewhere in north Lincolnshire. The postulated west-midland provenance of the author’s original has not been proved (McIntosh, “The Textual Transmission”).

The manuscript of the *Stanzaic Morte* was copied by two scribes in succession: scribe A copied lines 1-1091, scribe B lines 1092-3969. They are “similar linguistically, of the NE Midlands, and possibly of Rutland” (LALME, vol. I, p. 111).

The Winchester manuscript of Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur* was copied by two scribes, probably from west Northamptonshire (east midlands), working together sometime between 1470 and 1483. Malory was from Warwickshire, and his family also held a manor in nearby Northamptonshire. His English conforms with the emerging standard of the second half of the 15th century, but with features from the northeast midlands (Lincolnshire), that is the dialect of the romance material he was steeped in (McIntosh, review). The *Morte* was also printed by William Caxton in 1485: he edited the work by dividing it into books (21) and chapters, and regularised the northerly features.

Notice that the linguistic provenance need not coincide with the place of production. Malory was a prisoner in London when he completed his work; and the *Gawain*-poet, though certainly a native of the northwest midlands, might have lived and worked in London in the service of an aristocrat from the same region: the poem’s courtly sophistication does not fit the provincial milieu of the northwest midlands (Bennett).



## II.2 General linguistic features

### II.2.0 Special letters

þ Þ thorn = th [ þat = that ]  
 ȝ ȝ yogh = y or gh or w [ ȝet = yet; knyȝt = knight /knɪxt/; felawe = fellow ]

The letter <ȝ> is also used for <z> : watȝ = watz 'was' [ Modern editions use <z> ].

### II.2.1 Personal pronouns

#### Second- and third-person pronouns

	nominative	oblique	possessive
2 sing.	þou, thou	þe, the	þy, þyn, thy, thyne
2 pl.	ȝe, ye	yow, you	your, yowre, ȝowre
3 sing. f.	ho, scho, she	her, hir	her, hir
3 pl.	þay, they	hem, hom, them	her, hor, þayr, their

*ye/you* are also a polite form of address:

- (1) wheresomever ye go, I woll folow you (M 184.37-8)

The personal pronouns may be reflexive,

- (2) knightis arme them bydene (St 49)

and reciprocal:

- (3) yif evyr we may mete us more (St 471)

## II.2.2 *Verb inflections*

Present tense, 2nd and 3rd person singular:

	ending
2 sing.	-est, -es
3 sing.	-eth, -es

The *-es* ending of 3rd singular is northern, spreading to the south.

## II.2.3 *Participles*

	ending	prefix
present part.	-and, -ing	
verbal noun	-ing	
past part.		y-

*-and* occurs in *Gawain*, *Stanzaic Morte* and *Alliterative Morte*. Malory uses *-ing*, but retains *-and* in the tale of king Arthur and Lucius based on *Alliterative Morte*:

- (4) he fyndys two fyres flamand full hyghe (M 122.21-2)  
 (5) two fyrez fyndez, flawmande full hye (All 945)

Notice the distinction between the participle *-and* and the verbal noun *-ing*:

- (6) talkkande before þe hyȝe table of trifles ful hende (G 108)  
 (7) and the teccheles termes of talkyng noble (G 917)  
 (8) Waynour, waykly wepande, hym kyssiz (All 697)  
 (9) thy wonrydez and thy wepyng woundez myn herte (All 707)

See also

- (10) crakkande (G 1166)
- (11) crakkyng (G 116)
- (12) laʒande (G 988, 1068, 1207, 1212, 1757)
- (13) laʒyng (G 1954)

The two forms are conflated already in Chaucer.

The prefix *y-* of past participles comes from Old English *ge-*, but it is used also with Romance verbs:

- (14) *ibrowghte* (St 1093) = brought
- (15) *imanased* (St 479) = menaced

#### II.2.4 *Negation*

- ne* + VERB
- ne* + VERB + *not* (*noʒt*, *nought*, *naught*)
- VERB + *not* (*noʒt*, *nought*, *naught*)

Contracted forms:

- nis* = *ne is*
- nas* = *ne was*
- nere* = *ne were*
- noʒde* = *ne wolde*
- niste* = *ne wiste* [knew]

Multiple negation is reinforcing:

- (16) *ne samned neuer in no syde* (G 659)
- (17) *of this dredfull dreme ne drede the no more* (All 829)

#### II.2.5 *Strong and weak past tense*

*Gawain* has both *fel* (G 430) and *falled* (G 2243) as the past tense of *falle* ‘fall’; *rysed* (G 1313) and *ros* (G 1148) as the past tense of *ryse* ‘rise’. *Alliterative Morte* has *rynnyd* (All 920) and *rane* (All 1526) as the past tense of *rynne* ‘run’.

#### II.2.6 *Periphrastic past tense*

The past tense may be formed with the pleonastic auxiliary *con/can*, *gan/gonne*:

- (18) *to chambre he con hym calle* (G 1666) ≈ he did call him
- (19) *and to hyr chamber gonne they go* (St 192) ≈ they did go

It is the past tense of *ginnen* 'begin'. The periphrastic function occurs almost exclusively in poetry with a metrical function: to put the infinitive in rhyme position and provide the required number of syllables (in *Gawain* it is used almost always in the rhyming lines of the stanza).

### II.2.7 *Auxiliary be with mutative verbs*

Mutative verbs are intransitive verbs involving a change of place or state:

- (20) Gawayn watz comen (G 2491)
- (21) the kynges are aryefede (All 600) ≈ arrived
- (22) his enemyes were entyrd into his londe (M 373.10.1)
- (23) Sir Gawayne was departed frome the courte (M 96.17-8)

Notice the difference between mutative and non-mutative use of the same verb:

- (24) as he had redyn longe in a grete foreste, he mette with a man was lyke a foster (M 153.9-10)
- (25) whan the Kynge was rydden, Sir Launcelot and Sir Lavayne made them redy to ryde (M 600.40-1)

*had redyn* [ridden] is an activity going on for some time (atelic); *was rydden* means that the king had left and was no longer there (telic). The same applies to hypothetical statements:

- (26) al were slypped vpon slepe (G 244)
- (27) myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn (G 1858) ≈ if he might

### II.2.8 *Infinitive with arbitrary subject*

- (28) þe burne bede bryng his blonk (G 2024) ≈ bade somebody bring
- (29) a turnement the kinge lett bede (St 41) ≈ commanded to be announced
- (30) thys ys the moste shamefullyste message that ever Y herde speke off (M 39.10-1)
- (31) Kynge Arthure lette bury this knight rychely (M 53.21)

Present-Day English requires a passive construction (*spoken of; had this knight buried*) or a subject before the infinitive (*let men bury this knight*).

### II.2.9 *Reflexive verbs*

Malory displays a number of reflexive verbs that are no longer such in Present-Day English:

- (32) I assente me thereto (M 281.12) ≈ agree
- (33) I caste me to ryde aftir hym (M 361.3) ≈ intend
- (34) I drede me sore to passe this forest (M 188.4)
- (35) he dressed hym ayenste hem (M 70.24-5) ≈ proceeded
- (36) I woll hast me to syke hym (M 609.5-6) ≈ will hasten
- (37) he remembirde hym of his sistir Morgan le fay (M 89.47-90.1)
- (38) he repented hym of his othe (M 385.20-1)

Examples in *Gawain*:

- (39) fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe (G 8) ≈ makes his way
- (40) and to his bed hym diȝt (G 994) ≈ went
- (41) bot ros hir vp radly, rayked hir þeder (G 1735) ≈ rose, went
- (42) bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde; þe leude hym acordez (G 1863) ≈ consents
- (43) þer as he herd þe howndes þat hasted hym swyþe (G 1897) ≈ hasted them = hastened

Cp. Shakespeare's Sonnet 27: "Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed"

II.2.10 *Impersonal verbs*

Verbs in the third person singular with no subject or with dummy *it* as subject:

- (44) me longith (St 559) ≈ I yearn
- (45) hym dremyd of a dragon (All 760) ≈ he dreamed
- (46) whan Sir Trystrames was armed as hym lyked beste (M 275.32-3)
- (47) me repenteth, said Balyn, that ever I cam within this countrey (M 59.8-9)
- (48) me lyste nat to telle (M 53.36) ≈ I do not wish
- (49) me forthynkith that I have greved Kynge Arthure (M 45.28) ≈ I regret
- (50) me shamyth of that I have done (M 268.16-7) ≈ I am ashamed of what I have done
- (51) hym thought there was com into hys londe gryffens and serpentis (M 30.11-2) ≈ it seemed to him
- (52) hit fortuneth me that I was aslepe in the wyndow abovyn your hede (M 300.4-5)
- (53) hyt myssefortuneth Sir Gawayne and all hys brethirne were in Kynge Arthurs chamber (M 646.17-8)

The verb *seem* + complement can be both personal and impersonal:

- (54) hym semys to be a straungere (M 147.22-3) ≈ he seems to be
- (55) he semed a knyght arraunte (M 536.44)
- (56) hym semed to be of the ayge of three hondred wynter (M 523.24-5) ≈ he seemed to be
- (57) she semed yonger than that othir (M 528.10)
- (58) confusede them semede (All 123) ≈ they seemed
- (59) the semys a noble knight (St 165) ≈ you seem

II.2.11 *Modal and lexical will*

Besides being a modal auxiliary, *will* is used also as a lexical verb:

*will* + OBJECT  
*will* + *that* CLAUSE

- (60) I will no giftez (G 1822)
- (61) I wolde that every knyght wolde do hys parte as I wolde do myne (M 51.1-2)
- (62) I woll that ye telle hym that I am a knight of Kynge Arthures (M 273.8-9)

After modal *will* the verb of motion can be left understood:

- (63) I wyl to þe chapel (G 2132)

II.2.12 *Postposed prepositions*

- (64) he carpez hem tille (G 1979) ≈ he speaks to them  
 (65) many a land they ganne through fare (St 438) ≈ they did go through many a land  
 (66) that thou arte of imanased here (St 479) ≈ by whom you are menaced

II.2.13 *Separated relative clauses*

- (67) al studied þat þer stod, and stalked hym nerre (G 237) ≈ al...þat  
 (68) þe blod brayd fro þe body, þat blykked on þe grene (G 429) ≈ blod...þat  
 (69) þat all ledes myghte lyke þat luyde þem apon (All 195) ≈ all ledes...þat  
 (70) that Criste was on crucifiede, þat Kyng es of Heuen (All 285) ≈ Criste...þat

II.2.14 *Resumptive pronouns*

A personal pronoun may occur after relative *that* to indicate its case:

- (71) þat a selly in si3t summe men hit holden (G 28) ≈ þat...hit = which  
 (72) þat alle prys and prowes and pured þewes  
 apendes to hys persoun (G 912-3) ≈ þat...to hys = to whose  
 (73) þat he ne dynges hym to deþe with dynt of his honde (G 2105) ≈ þat...hym = whom  
 (74) þis is a chapel of meschaunce, þat chekke hit bytyde! (G 2195) ≈ þat...hit = which

### III. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: metre, syntax, vocabulary

#### III.1 *Metre and syntax*

The prosody of the line is modelled by syntactic constituents and word order.

The alliterative line is made of two half-lines (a-verse and b-verse) separated by a syntactic pause and bound together by alliteration. Each half-line has two stressed syllables and a variable number of unstressed ones; alliteration binds the two halves by repetition of initial sounds in the two stressed syllables of the a-verse and in the first stressed syllable of the b-verse. The a-verse may have an extra stress with or without alliteration.

- (75) such **gl**áum ande **gl**é | **gl**órious to hére,  
**d**ére **d**ýn vpon **d**áy, | **d**áunsyng on nýztes (G 46-7)

The two half-lines may allocate main and subordinate clause (notice the order verb + auxiliary),

- (76) ladies laȝed ful loude, | þoȝ þay lost haden (G 69)

or dependent and main clause:

- (77) when þay had waschen worþyly | þay wenten to sete (G 72)

Subject and verb phrase (notice the order verb + auxiliary and object-subject-verb):

- (78) gestes þat go wolde | hor gromez þay calden (G 1126)

Verb phrase and subject:

- (79) justed ful jolilé | þise gentyle kniȝtes (G 42)

A clause and a prepositional phrase (notice the order object-subject-verb and noun-adjective):

- (80) mony klyf he ouerclambe | in contrayez straunge (G 713)

The b-verse may be a separated relative clause,

- (81) and alle þise oþer halowed | þat had no hornes (G 1914)

or a separated prepositional phrase:

- (82) loude crye watz þer kest | of clerkez and oþer (G 64)

Postposed prepositions are stressed, and can be used to close the b-verse,

- (83) þenn dressed he his drurye | double hym aboute (G 2033)

or to bracket the a-verse (with or without alliteration):

- (84) and sturnely sturez hit aboute, | þat stryke wyth hit þoȝt (G 331)  
 (85) whil mony so bolde yow aboute | vpon bench sytten (G 351)

This interplay of metre and syntax is the ‘metrical grammar’ of the alliterative line.

### III.2 Alliterative vocabulary

Alliteration needs a large stock of words. *Gawain* uses ten synonyms or near-synonyms for ‘man’,  
burne, freke, gome, hapel, lede, renk, schalk, segge, tulk, wyȝe  
which have high alliterative rank: they alliterate always or nearly always. The more appropriate  
word, instead, *knyȝt*, has low alliterative rank.

The ten words are not in Chaucer, nor have they passed into Present-Day English; they are  
Old English words, apart from *tulk*, which is Old Norse.

Other groups of synonyms or near-synonyms are:

generalized verbs of movement for ‘go’ or ‘ride’:

boȝe, cayre (ON), chose, drive, fare, ferke, founde, glyde, hale (OF), helde, keuer (OF), rayke (ON),  
seche, tourne (OF), wende, wynne

adverbs expressing promptness or speed (‘quickly’):

bylyue, deliuerly (OF), graybely (ON), ȝederly, ȝerne, radly, rapely (ON), rekenly, skete (ON), tite  
(ON), wyȝtly (ON)

### III.3 Old English, Old French, Old Norse

Sorted by etymologies, *Gawain* has a remarkable trilingual vocabulary:

	lemmas	forms
OE	1844	18183
OF	766	1730
ON	273	963
AN	8	19
OP	2	2
Other	38	52
tot.	2931	20949

AN = Anglo-Norman (a French dialect spoken in England); OP = Old Provençal.

On average, a French word every 1.5 lines, a Scandinavian word every 3 lines. French words are  
nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions, and are used for armour (ll. 566-618), hunting  
(ll. 1319-71), architecture (ll. 785-802). Old Norse words cover a wider grammatical range (nouns,  
verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and pronouns), and have a special application

in topographical description, “to evoke the harsh and hostile character of the northern countryside into which Gawain ventures” (Turville-Petre, p. 76). The three alliterating words in

þe skwez of þe scowtes skayned hym þoʒt (G 2167)

are Old Norse: *skwez* ‘clouds’ (modern ‘sky’), *scowtes* ‘jutting rocks’ and *skayned* ‘grazed’.

The density of Old Norse in *Gawain* can be gauged from a comparison with Chaucer, who has 214 Old Norse lemmas in the whole of his work (out of over 10,000 lemmas).

### III.4 Germanic and Romance

Norman Hinton has compared the etymological makeup of the vocabulary of the *Gawain*-poet’s works to that of Chaucer and a sample of the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED):

	%	Germanic	Romance	Other
<i>Gawain</i> -poet		61.85	37.51	0.22
Chaucer		42.31	57.37	0.13
MED		39.22	60.37	0.41

The MED sample is from the entire period 1100-1500, but Hinton has also found at what stages the etymological mix of the language as a whole approximates that of Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet, and the result is surprising: the *Gawain*-poet’s mix resembles that of the time in which his poems are usually thought to have been composed, whereas Chaucer’s resembles that of sixty years after his death.

	%	Germanic	Romance	Other
MED by 1390		60.45	39.91	0.16
MED by 1460		41.62	58.00	0.37

The two poets are roughly contemporary, but not their vocabularies. Chaucer’s is forward-looking, whereas the *Gawain*-poet’s is traditional, as we would expect from alliterative poetry: into the old, native rhythms and diction of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the poet has imported the refinements and brilliant Gothic colours of the new courtly and chivalric world.

#### IV. The shrinking of literary England

Drama best represents the change from Late Medieval to Early Modern in terms of geographical distribution. In the 15th and early 16th centuries plays were written and staged for local communities in their local dialects, and we have dramatic texts from York and Wakefield (Yorkshire), Coventry (Warwickshire), Chester (Cheshire), and East Anglia, the richest dramatic laboratory of the country. After 1576, when the first theatre was built there, drama became an exclusively London affair, with the rest of the country dependent on the provincial tours of the London theatrical companies.



By then the London standard had become mandatory.

In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) George Puttenham gave the contemporary ‘maker’ or poet this piece of advice as to which variety of language – diachronic and diatopic – he should use:

Our maker therefore at these dayes shall not follow *Piers Plowman* nor *Gower* nor *Lydgate* nor yet *Chaucer*, for their language is now out of vse with vs: neither shall he take the termes of Northernmen, such as they vse in dayly talke, whether they be noble men or gentlemen, or of their best carkes all is a matter: nor in effect any speech vsed beyond the riuer of Trent, though no man can deny that theirs is the purer English Saxon at this day, yet it is not so Courtly nor so currant as our Southerne English is, no more is the far Westerne mans speech: ye shall therefore take the vsuall speach of the Court, and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx. Myles, and not much aboue.

The contraction is drastic: not only the north beyond the Trent is cut out, but also most of the midlands: sixty miles from London is just as far as Oxford and Cambridge. Ricardian England – the age of Chaucer, Langland and the *Gawain*-poet – is a polyphony of literary dialects; Elizabethan England has just one variety, the standard centred around London – powerfully rich and versatile, but one diatopic variety nonetheless. Chaucer's 'Southren man' has won.

The reduction also applied backwards: the Middle English literature that survived in printed editions was that written in dialects close to the national standard. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were printed by Caxton in 1476 and 1484, and were well-known to Shakespeare; the *Gawain*-poet fell from literary knowledge, and only came back with the general rescue of Old and Middle English literature in the early 19th century (Madden's edition of 1839).

A diatopic diversity analogous to that of Middle English was to arise in the 20th century with the international varieties of English – or Englishes.

## ABBREVIATIONS

All = Alliterative Morte: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/AnoMort.html>  
(Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library)

G = *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. J. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (1925),  
second edition revised by N. Davis, Oxford, At the Clarendon Press 1967;  
text with glosses in Modern English and concordances at  
<http://www.maldura.unipd.it/dllags/brunetti/ME/index.html>

M = Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur or The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His  
Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table*, ed. by S. H. A. Shepherd, New York and London,  
Norton 2004; Caxton's edition is at <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/MaloryWks2>  
(University of Michigan)

St = Stanzaic Morte: *Le Morte Arthur*, ed. by P. F. Hissiger, The Hague and Paris,  
Mouton 1975

AN = Anglo-Norman

OE = Old English

OF = Old French

ON = Old Norse

OP = Old Provençal

## MANUSCRIPTS

*Gawain* : British Library Cotton Nero A. x [ late 14th century ]

*Stanzaic Morte Arthur* : British Library Harley 2252 [ late 14th century ]

*Alliterative Morte Arthure* : Lincoln Cathedral 91 [ c. 1440 ]

Malory : Winchester Manuscript = British Library Additional Manuscript 59678 [ two scribes  
working together 1470-1483 ]

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