Modern English Result	From Vowel Phoneme		Middle English Source	
			Sound of M.E.	Sound of M.E.
divine /dīvīn/ becomes	ay			
deem /dīm/ becomes	i → dim /dim/		"deem"	"rote"
dame /dem/ becomes	e → dem /dem/		"dame"	"roor"
	a → dam /dam/		"dahm"	"rawr"

Back Vowel Phoneme		Middle English Source	Modern English Result
aw	rout → rawt /		rout /rawt/
u	roor → /rot/	becomes	root /rur/
o	rote /rot/	becomes	rote /rot/
ɔ			

To put it another way, a Middle English word that would have sounded to us something like "hot" became *hate* during this period. So it was with the following pairs (giving first the approximate sound the M.E. word would have had for us, then the word that resulted from the Great Vowel Shift): "mane,"/"mean, "seen"/sign, "caught"/coat, "boar"/boot, "moose"/mouse. But before this change was well under way, the invention of printing and the vast changes which that produced had begun to crystallize English spelling. For this reason we inherit a writing system which really fits Chaucer's English better than ours. The Renaissance also saw the weakening of distinctions among unaccented vowels, a process that has now reached a point in English where words like "unsociable," though spelled as if they had four or more different vowels really have only two: /ənsõsəbəl/. But in some ways the most dramatic change in the modern period of English was brought about by a Renaissance borrowing binge that brought 12,000 new words into the language, many from Latin and Greek. Not all of these borrowings became permanent, but those that did have had an enormous influence on the character of Modern English. And they serve as a reminder that vocabulary is one of the ways in which we can expect Chaucer's English to differ from ours.

5. *Chaucer's English: Vocabulary*

In addition to the stock of native English words, Chaucer had French borrowings of all kinds to draw on. These borrowings ranged from the simple (like "simple") to the recondite (like "chivachie"); they included Norman French ("reward") and Central French ("guerdon"); and some bore the marks of exotic travels before reaching France (like "almageste" and "Dulcarnon"). An important group of French borrowings reflected the difference between French and native English interests and pursuits—for example, the difference between native herdsmen and French cooks: *ox,* "cow," from Old English, but *beef* from Old French; *pig* from Old English, but *porc* from Old French, etc. Most were recently enough arrived in the language so that usage was divided about stress; almost all could be stressed in the French manner, on the final syllable, or according to the English pattern, on what native speakers took to be the root syllable (sometimes they were wrong).

French was not the only language to lend words to English. Among the stock available to Chaucer were words from Latin borrowed over the entire period of growth of English, words from Scandinavian, and words from some other European tongues. But despite all this foreign element, Chaucer had no trouble talking without using a single borrowed word: *A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man.* That expression seems quite natural and lucid to us today. As a matter of fact, Chaucer's familiar native words are like his exotic foreign words from one standpoint: neither group is the source of greatest trouble for the Modern English reader. It is not Chaucer's *chivachie* and *almageste* that make trouble for us as students of Middle English. It is his *coy* and *verray*—words whose face is familiar, but whose function in the language soon turns out to be a trap for the undiscriminating. For a complex pattern of semantic shifts has given us Modern English words whose meanings would have seemed ridiculous to Chaucer—*coy* meaning "coquettish," for example, where Chaucer would have used it to mean "meek" or "quiet." Often, as in the case of *coy,* Chaucer's meaning was closer to the etymological meaning—here Latin *quietus.* Below is a list of the most troublesome of these "misleading cognates," and a bit of memory work now will save many a twisted reading later.

Misleading Cognates (NOTE WELL: ALL OF THESE WORDS HAVE SEVERAL MEANINGS, ONLY THE MOST TROUBLESOME OF WHICH ARE LISTED BELOW. FOR example, M.E. *also* will not present a problem when it means "also," which is frequently; but it is important to remember that it will often mean "as.")

also = as; *also God my soule save,* "as God may save my soul"

agayn(s) = up to, in front of; *he was come agayns thilke pyrie,* "he came up to that pear tree"

anon = immediately; *I was of hir felaweshipe anon,* "I was immediately one of them"

aventure = chance; *what aventure hath guided thee?,* "what chance has guided thee?"

bounte(e) = goodness; *Nature never formed so moche bounte wythoute mercy,* "Nature never formed so much goodness without mercy."

buxom = obedient; *hir housbonde sholde be buxom unto his wyf,* "her husband should be obedient to his wife"

cas = condition, chance; *neyther cas ne fortune bym decyuen,* "neither chance nor fortune deceives him"

che(e)re = bearing, expression; *this shal be my cheere,* "this shall be my expression"

corage = heart; *in noble corage oughte ben aret,* "in a noble heart there should be restraint"

coy = meek; *hir smylyng was ful symple and coy,* "her smile was quite innocent and meek"

daliaunce = conversation; *unto no wight dooth he daliaunce,* "he makes conversation with no one"

daungerous = stand-offish; *if I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe,* "if I hold back, God give me sorrow"

drede = doubt; *it is no drede,* "there is no doubt"

drenche(n) = drown; *he sholde drenche lord and lady,* "he would drown lord and lady"

fe(e)re = companion; *wel sit it a woful wight to han a drery feere,* "it well suits a woeful man to have a dreary companion"

forward = agreement; *I made forward erly for to ryse,* "I made an agreement to rise early"

fredam = generosity; *hir hand is ministre of fredam for almesse,* "her hand is minister of generosity for alms"

gentil = having the qualities associated with exalted birth; *Therefore sholden ye be gentil men,* "therefore you should be noble men"

governaunce = control, behavior; *nought knowynge of his false governaunce,* "knowing nothing of his deceitful behavior"

honeste(e) = decency; *for honestee no vileyns word spak he,* "for decency's sake he said nothing disgraceful"

kynde = nature; *agaynes kynde it were to lyven in thys wyse,* "it would be against nature to live this way"

lette(n) = hinder; *thou lettest oure disport,* "you're hindering our pleasure"

lust = pleasure; *of huntyng for the hare was al his lust,* "his great pleasure was hunting the hare"

nyce = foolish; *be no wyght so nyce to take a wife oonly for chere,* "let no one be so foolish as to take a wife simply for her face"

quite(n) = repay; *ful wel koude I thee quite,* "I could easily repay thee"

richesse = nobility; *vyce may wel be heir to old richesse,* "vice may well be heir to former nobility"

sad = serious; *in the brest of hire virginitee ther was enclosed rype and sad corage,* "in the breast of her virginity was enclosed a mature and serious heart"

sely = good, innocent, poor; *algate this sely mayde is slayn, alas,* "still this poor, innocent maid is slain, alas"

skile = reason; *I can shewe hym swyche skiles,* "I can show him such reasons"

solempne = ceremonious, festive; *smale foules songen the moste solempne servise,* "little birds sang the most festive service"

spille(n) = destroy; *what joie bastow thyn owen folk to spille?* "what joy hast thou to destroy thine own people?"

sterve(n) = die; *pitee were I shulde sterve,* "it would be a pity if I should die"

tho = then, those; *I was able to have lerned tho,* "I could have learned then," *thoo that hadde doon unkyndenesse,* "those that had been cruel"

trouthe = faithfulness, pledge; *ye shul youre trouthe holden,* "you shall keep your word"

verray = true; *pleyn delit was verray felicitee parfit,* "simple pleasure was the true, perfect felicity"

wood = insane; *what sholde he studie and make hymselven wood?,* "why should he study and drive himself mad?"

worship = honor; *I besette my wyt to do hir worship,* "I put my mind to doing her honor"

wynne(n) = gain; *I am wont to preche for to wynne,* "I am accustomed to preach for gain"

yerne = eagerly; *myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne,* "my hands and tongue go so eagerly"

Rather on the other side from familiar words with strange meanings stand Chaucer's unfamiliar words, many of them the last vestiges of Old English forms that would die out in the Renaissance. Perhaps the most troublesome of this group are the strong verbs. As English speakers we are used to dealing with "swim, swam, swum"; but when we encounter *wat* or *hight* we have no clue that would send us to *witen* or *hoten.* The same bafflement is produced by contracted forms (*bit* for *biddeth*), by remnants of old inflections (*alderbest* for "best of all"), and, of course, by obsolete words (*fele* for "many"). A few of these obsolete or otherwise difficult forms survive in set expressions, like "I'd rather do it myself," where the Middle English *rathe* for "soon" can be made out. (Compare this with "I'd sooner die than do it.") Many more survive in dialect, like *mowe* and *sicker* in Scotland. Quite a number of these problems will be discussed next under morphology, but let us give a selected list here of strange forms that will be met often enough to deserve memorizing.

Obsolete or Difficult Forms

(NOTE WELL: ALL OF THESE WORDS HAVE SEVERAL MEANINGS, ONLY THE MOST TROUBLESOME OF WHICH ARE LISTED BELOW. For example, M.E. *als* can mean "also," but it is probably most troublesome for the Modern English reader when it means "as")

al = although; *al be that I knowe nat Love in deed,* "although it is true that I don't know of love from experience" (cf. Mod. E. "albeit")

als = as; *als evere moot I thryve,* "as I hope to thrive"

algate = anyway, still; *algate this sely mayde is slayn, alas,* "still this poor, innocent maid is slain, alas"

blyve = quickly; *goo now faste and bye the blyve,* "go fast now and hurry quickly"

bremne(n) = burn; *I made hym bremne his book,* "I made him burn his book"

breyde(n) = start, jump; *she of hir swongh gan breyde,* "she started from her swoon"

clepe(n) = call; *Pan, that men clepe god of kynde,* "Pan, whom men call god of nature"

conne(n), konne(n) = know; his lessoun, that he wende konne, "his lesson, which he thought he knew"

fele = many; with floures fele, "with many a flower"

ferre = farther; er I bere the moche ferre, "before I bear thee much farther"

fonde(n) = try; she wolde not fonde to holde no wyght in balance, "she would not try to string a man along"

fortby = therefore; fortby I is come, "therefore I have come"

hap = chance; shal I clepe byt hap other grace?, "shall I call it chance or luck?"

hende = able, gracious; on a day this hende Nicholas fil with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye, "one day this able Nicholas chanced to be playing and joking with this young wife"

highte = called; this Reeve sat upon a ful good stot that highte Scot, "this reeve sat on a very good horse called 'Scot'"

hye = haste; by the hond in hye she took hym faste, "by the hand in haste she took fast hold of him"

lyte = little; in thy bed ful lyte is, "very little is in thy head"

me(e)de = reward, bribe; by no force ne by no meede be was nat able for to speede, "he couldn't succeed by force or bribe"

mete(n) = dream; me mette eek I was at a feeste, "I dreamed also that I was at a feast"

nere (ne were) = were not; if it nere to long to heere, "if it were not too long to listen to"

nis (ne is) = is not; in this world nys creature lyvynge "there is not a creature living in this world"

no fors = no matter; therof no fors, "no matter about that"

nolde (ne wolde) = would not; there was no dore that he nolde heve off its hinges "there was no door that he would not heave off its hinges"

no(o)t (ne wot) = know not; I noot how men hym calle, "I don't know his name"

no(o)t = must; and but I speke, I mot for sorwe deye, "and unless I speak, I must die of sorrow"

mowe(n) = may; we mowe swymme as in a barge, "we may float as in a barge"

nadde (ne hadde) = had not; nadde comfort ben of hire presence, I hadde be ded, "if comfort had not been part of her, I would have died"

nyste (ne wyste) = knew nor; I nyste never wher that I was, "I knew not where I was"

or = ere, before; or he sterve, "before he dies"

paraunter = perhaps; paraunter brod as a covercle, "perhaps as a broad as a pot-cover"

rathe = soon; other late or rathe, "either late or soon" (cf. Mod. E. "I'd rather do it, I'd sooner do it")

sbende(n) = injure; n'apoplexie sbente nat hir heed, "nor did apoplexy injure her head"

siker = sure; be thou siker, "you may be sure"

sithen = then, afterwards; to pieces do me drawe, and sithen honge, "have me drawn to pieces and then hanged"

steven = voice; he crew with blisful steven, "he crowed with a happy voice"

stynte(n) = stop; he stynte a while, "he stopped a while"

sweven = dream; this was my sweven, "this was my dream"

swich = such; swich byn hath his estat red above, "such an end hath his lofty royal state"

swynke(n) = work; men that swynke, "men that work"

swythe, swithe = swiftly; this foul so swithe gan descende, "this bird so swiftly did descend"

trowe(n) = believe; it was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe, "it was almost a span broad, I believe"

unnethe = hardly; unnethe it sene was in his chere, "it could hardly be seen in his face"

wisly = surely; as wisly as I sey the, "as surely as I saw thee"

wot = know (check writen); nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke, "I do not know whether I float or sink"

wrie(n) = turn, cover; men hem wrien with asshen pale, "people cover them with pale ashes"

yfe(e)re = together; she and alle hir folk in wente yfeere, "she and all her people went in together"

ywis = certainly; that ye han seyd is right ynough, ywis, "what you have told is enough certainly"

6. Chaucer's English: Morphology

When we use the term grammar in this booklet, we will mean "the way language works, its system," and not "correct usage" or "rules for writing"—just in case you have been using the term to include those. Grammar can be divided into morphology—the patterns within words that signal how the words will work, like the inflections that we spoke of earlier—and syntax—the patterns within the sentence that show how its parts work—which we often call "word order." Chaucer's grammar is essentially that of Modern English, and the only way to make it seem complicated is to discuss it from the standpoint of Old English, or to pretend that none of us speak Modern English. To tell the truth, Chaucer's morphology—the pattern of grammatical signals within his words—will be very smooth going for any speaker of Modern English who keeps in mind some thirteen "conversion factors," or principal points of difference between the grammar of Chaucer's English and the grammar of our own.

Nouns:

(1) Chaucer could make possessives of some kinds of nouns without using an ending:

in hope to stonden in his lady grace, "in hopes of winning his lady's favor"