

# Spelling Changes in Middle English.

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## Rules of Reading

- 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. Before considering the evolution of English sounds one must get acquainted with the system of ME spelling in order to distinguish between sound changes and graphical changes.
- 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.
- In ME the runic letters passed out of use. Thorn and the crossed *d* were replaced by the digraph *th*, which retained the same sound value; the rune “wynn” was displaced by double *uu* — *w*.
- The ligatures fell into disuse.

- .After the period of Anglo-Norman dominance 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. The digraphs *ou*, *ie*, and *ch*, which occurred in many French borrowings and were regularly used in Anglo- Norman texts were adopted as new ways of indicating the sounds

- Also

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- Sh

- Dg

- Long sounds were indicated by double letters

- Some replacements were probably made to avoid confusion of resembling letters: thus *o* was employed not only for *lo* but also to indicate short *lul* alongside the letter *a*; it happened when *a* 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. That is how OE *munuc* became ME *monk*, though it was pronounced as *Imuokl*. This replacement was facilitated — *ii not* caused — by the similar use of the letter *o* in *Anglo-Norman*.
- The letter *y* came to be used as an equivalent of *i* and was evidently preferred when *i* could be confused with the surrounding letters *m*, *it* and others. Probably *y* acquired the new sound value. Sometimes, however, *y*, as well as *to*, were put at the end of a word for purely ornamental reasons, so as to finish the word with a curve.

# Peculiarities of Middle English Spelling

Letters indicating vowels

Letters indicating consonants

## Single letters

*a* [a]  
*y*, as well as *i* [i]  
*o* [o] or [u]

*c* [s] or [k]  
*f* [f]  
*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:]  
*ie* [e:]  
*oo* [o:] or [ɔ:]  
*ou* [u:] or [ou]  
*ow* [u:] or [ou]

*ch*, *tch* [tʃ]  
*dg* [dʒ]  
*gh* [x] or [x']  
*qu* [kw]  
*th* [θ] or [ð]  
*sh*, *sch*, *ssh* [ʃ]  
*wh* [hw]

- The letters *th* and *s* indicate voiced sounds between vowels, and voiceless sounds initially, finally and next to other voiceless consonants: ME *worthy* L'wur, *esy* ['e:zi], *thyng* [*thing*] (NE *worthy*, *easy*, *thing*, *sorrow*). Note that in ME — unlike OE this rule does not apply to the letter *f*: it stands for the voiceless *f* while the voiced [v] is shown by *v* or *u*.

- As stated above, o usually stands for [u] next to letters whose shape resembles the shape of the letter u, though sometimes even in the same environment it can indicate [ɔ], cf. ME *some* ('sum] and *mane* ('mo:ne] (NE *some*, *moon*).
- To determine the sound value of o one can look up the origin of the sound in OE or the pronunciation of the word in NE: the sound [u] did not change in the transition from OE to ME (the OE for *some* was *sum*).



- The digraphs *ou* and *ow* were interchangeable. Their sound value can be determined either by tracing the words to OE prototypes or by taking into account the modern pronunciation.

- (1) Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote  
[xwan 'θat ap'rillə 'wiθ his 'ʃu:rəs 'so:tə]
- (2) the droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
[θə 'druxt of 'mɑ:rtʃ hɑθ 'pɜ:səd 'to: θə 'ro:tə]
- (3) And bathed every veyne in swich licour,  
[and 'bɑ:ðəd 'evri 'veɪn in 'swɪtʃ li'ku:r]
- (4) Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
[of 'xwɪtʃ ver'tju: en'dʒendrəd 'is θə 'flu:r]

When April with his sweet showers  
The draught of March has pierced to the root,  
And bathed every vein in such liquor,  
Of which (whose) virtue (power) engendered is the flower;

- (5) Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth  
[xwan 'zefi'rus æ:k 'wiθ his 'swe:tə 'bræ:θ]
- (6) Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
[in'spɪrəd 'hɑθ in 'evri 'hɔ:lt and 'hæ:θ]
- (7) The tendre croppes, and the younge sonne  
[θə 'tendrə 'kroppəs 'and θə 'juŋgə 'sunnə]
- (8) Hath in the Ram his halve cours y-ronne,  
[hɑθ 'in θə rɑm his 'hɛlvə 'kurs i-'runnə]

When Zephyr also with his sweet breath  
Inspired has into every holt and heath  
The tender crops, and the young sun  
Has in the Ram half his course run (has passed half  
of its way in the constellation of Ram).