A Middle English Reader

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A MIDDLE ENGLISH READER
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EDITED, WITH GRAMMATICAL INTRODUCTION
NOTES, AND GLOSSARY

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This Reader is intended to serve as an introduction to the language and literature of the period concisely called Middle English, that is the centuries between 1100 and 1500. It consists of a Grammatical Introduction based on lectures to students beginning the study of Middle English; selections arranged on the basis of the great dialectal divisions of the language during the period, and accompanied by explanatory Notes; a Glossary which, in addition to the necessary general information of a lexicon, accounts for the forms of words on the basis of dialectal differences in Old and Middle English.

The arrangement of the book on the basis of a single dialect has seemed to be justified by the writer's experience with students during the last ten years. Whatever book has been used, the student has been first introduced to those selections best illustrating the chronological development of a single dialect, as the Midland, and only then to each of the others, with direct relation always to the one already mastered. This has not failed to insure a fairly accurate knowledge of the main features of each division of the language, rather than a confused conception of linguistic forms such as often results from reading selections without regard to dialectal differences. This method, it will be seen, is but following the best practice in reading Old English, or Anglo-Saxon. Indeed, the great advance in the latter study may be dated from the time when a grammar was prepared on the basis of texts representing a single dialect, West Saxon, in its purity, rather than a mixture of dialectal forms such as much Old English literature presents. The plan of Old English study, therefore, as well as experience in teaching, seems to justify some such arrangement as the present. The emphasis of the Midland dialect is owing to its fundamental importance in linguistic and literary history. Since Midland became the language of the most important literature as early as the middle of the fourteenth century, and the foundation of the standard language of modern times, it is that dialect which is most important to the student of both language and literature for at least six centuries. Besides, the apparent continuity of Southern
English in its relation to West Saxon is apparent rather than real in any important sense. So thoroughly is the continuity broken by important phonetic and orthographic changes, wide-spread leveling of inflexions, and considerable differences in syntax, that it affords no decided advantage over Midland, even to the student fresh from Old English study. In any case the change to Midland must be made not later than the middle of the fourteenth century, and the student must then be led back to the beginnings of Midland English, in order fully to understand the language of Chaucer and those who follow him. There seems, therefore, no special advantage in emphasizing the Southern dialect as the descendant of West Saxon, though this may be done even with the present book if desired.

It is believed that a sufficient number of texts have been given, to represent adequately for the beginner each great dialectal division of the language. Kentish has been given least space, and is not separated from the rest of Southern English. This is owing partly to the limitations of an introductory book, partly to the relatively unimportant place of that dialect in both Old and Middle English. The Kentish selections chosen could be easily grouped together, however, and special emphasis of Kentish peculiarities will be found in the Notes upon them. On the other hand, the dialect of London is especially represented in order to illustrate the change from Southern to Midland, so important in relation not only to the language of Chaucer but also to Modern English. Owing, also, to necessary limitations of a single handbook texts from writers of the fifteenth century have not been used. To that century little introduction is necessary apart from such study of the earlier period as this book will permit.

As to the selections themselves, the purpose has been to present texts representing the dialects in their purity, together with as much of interest as is compatible with the first and most important consideration. Comparison with such lists as those by Morsbach, ‘Mittelenglische Grammatik,’ pp. 7-11, will show how fully this has been done. In fact, except for two or three selections from poetical romances, chosen on the score of interest along with a fair degree of purity, all texts may be relied upon as typical of the time and region to which they belong. When possible, texts or selections not found in other books have been used, so as to furnish a greater variety within the reach of student and teacher. In all cases the selections are of sufficient length to afford a fairly com-
Prehensive view of the author or period. Partly because they would not be typical, partly owing to mixture of dialectal forms, some short pieces which might have been included on the score of interest have been omitted.

For each selection, the best manuscript from the standpoint of linguistic purity has always been followed. This is now more easily possible owing to the great number of well-edited texts accessible in printed form, but the manuscripts themselves have been examined when necessary to secure linguistic purity. It has not been thought necessary, however, to burden the pages of an introductory book with readings from less important texts, though references to these sometimes occur in the Notes. Finally, the selections chosen have been reproduced in their integrity in all essential particulars. Yet this does not mean that a mediæval punctuation has been preserved, or an irregular and meaningless use of capitals. To retain these, as has sometimes been done in beginners' books, is but to confuse the student without any measurable advantage. The footnotes give references to abbreviations expanded with regard to the forms of the particular dialect, and to manuscript readings not given in the text. These are usually errors of a careless scribe, or readings in which emendation seemed necessary. Regularization of orthography has not been attempted in general, but in the Midland selections, as those which will usually be first read, some slight assistance of this sort has been offered the beginner. All such forms, however, have been indicated in footnotes, so that they cannot mislead if they do not assist.

The Notes on each selection give such information as is known regarding the manuscript, its date, author, place of composition, and some account of the work from which the extract is made. This is followed by explanations of points in grammar, history, life of the times, and similar subjects when necessary. In all cases, use is made of critical articles in the various scholarly journals, and references are given to assist the student in independent examination when desirable.

The Glossary has been prepared on the basis of the Midland dialect, from which the greater number of selections have been made, but with inclusion in alphabetical order of all words not found in the Midland selections, and cross-references when necessary to the forms of other dialects. In the matter of cross-references, as in arrangement within the alphabet, the needs of the
beginner have always been regarded as the most important in an introductory book. Thus the strictest alphabetic arrangement has been chosen in all cases. The ligature æ, though a simple sound rather than a diphthong at any time, has been placed after ad because the beginner will more easily find it there. He may then easily learn its real value, as he must in most other cases in which alphabetic arrangement gives no certain clue.

A word as to the Grammatical Introduction may not be out of place. In the incomplete state of the exhaustive treatment of Middle English grammar proposed by Morsbach, it would be impossible to expect so accurate a summary as may in future be written. The task was simpler, however, than it might seem. It was to present in systematic order the main grammatical facts of the Midland dialect, with such notes as would make possible an intelligent reading of the literature in the remaining divisions of the language. It need not be said that the writer is grateful, as all must be, for the part of Morsbach's grammar which has appeared. He has also made use of most special studies of the period, or of particular works, so far as they were important for the book in hand. But the arrangement of material is based upon the writer's presentation of the subject to students for some years.

The book is intended for those who have had some introduction to the study of Old English. This will be seen from the numerous references to Old English grammar, and to grammatical forms of the older period. It is needless to say that no minutely careful study of Middle English is possible without a fundamental knowledge of the earlier period. On the other hand, a reading knowledge of Middle English literature is easily possible with even a moderate attention to grammatical relationships, and it is hoped that the book may be of use to those who have not begun with the more fundamental study of earlier English.

It is impossible here to give credit to all books and monographs used in the preparation of the Reader. Mention in Introduction or Notes of articles and commentators is intended to imply grateful acknowledgement of indebtedness. Failure to mention others does not imply that the writer has not used them so far as seemed wise. Certainly it has been his purpose to weigh and consider practically all of the literature of the subject up to the time of going to press.

Cleveland, April 15, 1904.