



THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD.

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Abstract: *This paper examines the defining features of Middle English (11th-15th centuries), focusing on the historical and linguistic factors that shaped its development. It analyzes grammatical, phonetic, and orthographic changes in the language, linking them to significant historical events.*

Key words: *Geoffery Chaucer, Middle English Period, Early and Late Middle English Period, Anglo-Saxons, Great vowel shift, Norman Conquest.*

Аннотация: *В этой статье рассматриваются определяющие черты среднеанглийского языка (XI-XV вв.), особое внимание уделяется историческим и лингвистическим факторам, которые сформировали его развитие. Анализируются грамматические, фонетические и орфографические изменения в языке, которые связываются со значимыми историческими событиями.*

Annotatsiya: *Ushbu maqolada o'rta ingliz tilining (11—15-asrlar) belgilovchi xususiyatlari ko'rib chiqilib, uning rivojlanishini shakllantirgan tarixiy va lingvistik omillarga e'tibor qaratiladi. Unda tildagi grammatik, fonetik va orfografik o'zgarishlar tahlil qilinadi, ularni muhim tarixiy voqealar bilan bog'laydi.*

The Middle English period (roughly 1100-1500) was a dynamic era of linguistic and cultural evolution, fundamentally shaping Modern English. While retaining a significant portion (40-60%) of its Old English Germanic vocabulary, Middle English absorbed substantial borrowings from Norman French and Latin, particularly in formal domains. Like Old English, Middle English lacked a dedicated future tense marker, relying on auxiliary verbs. The period witnessed simplification of grammar, particularly in noun, adjective, and verb inflections, alongside significant changes in pronunciation, including the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift. Orthography remained inconsistent, reflecting the language's ongoing development. The influx of Anglo-Norman terms enriched the language, especially in areas like government, law, and the arts, while the core vocabulary stayed predominantly Germanic with a growing Old Norse influence.

The Norman Conquest of England:

The major events that define the Middle English Period are at the cusp of the era, the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 and marking the close of the time was the arrival of printing in Britain and the English Reformation. In 1066 the King of England, Edward the Confessor died with no heir leaving the throne to Harold Godwinson. Harold was





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soon after attacked by the Duke of Normandy, William who overthrew the new king in the Battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066 (Littlefield, 2013). King Harold was killed in this battle and William becomes the new King of England. Because of the Norman invasion of England, the Old English era ended as the Normans brought French politics, fashion, architecture and most importantly the language (Durkin, 2013). These influences began to seep into the culture of the time and over the next decades the English people adopted the culture and adapted their language.

The Norman Conquest led to a massive influx of French vocabulary into English. This wasn't a simple replacement, but rather a blending. Many words relating to government, law, the aristocracy, and cuisine entered the language. This resulted in English having doublets – pairs of words with similar meanings, one from Old English and one from French.

After the Norman conquest of England, Law French became the standard language of courts, parliament, and society.

The Norman dialects of the ruling classes mixed with the Anglo-Saxon of the people and became Anglo-Norman, and Anglo-Saxon underwent a gradual transition into Middle English. Around the turn of the thirteenth century, Layamon wrote in Middle English. Other transitional works were popular entertainment, including a variety of romances and lyrics. With time, the English language regained prestige, and in 1362 it replaced French and Latin in Parliament and courts of law. Early examples of Middle English literature are the *Ormulum* and *Havelock the Dane*.

In the fourteenth century major works of English literature began once again to appear, including the works of Chaucer. The latter portion of the 14th century also saw the consolidation of English as a written language and a shift to secular writing. In the late 15th century William Caxton printed four-fifths of his works in English, which helped to standardize the language and expand the vocabulary.

After the Norman conquest of England, the written form of the Old English language continued in some monasteries but few literary works are known from this period. Under the influence of the new aristocracy, Law French became the standard language of courts, parliament, and polite society.

As the invaders integrated, their language and literature mingled with that of the natives. The Norman dialects of the ruling classes became Anglo-Norman, and Old English underwent a gradual transition into Middle English. Political power was no longer in English hands, so the West Saxon literary language had no more influence than any other dialect. Middle English literature is written, then, in the many dialects that correspond to the history, culture, and background of the individual writers.

While Anglo-Norman or Latin was preferred for high culture and administration, English literature by no means died out, and a number of important works illustrate the development of the language.





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The Norman Conquest of 1066 spurred the development of Middle English, significantly enriching the language with Norman French vocabulary and leading to grammatical simplification and increased syntactic flexibility. This era fostered diverse literary forms, including religious texts, allegories, romances, and fables, exemplified by metrical romances and morality plays reflecting both secular and religious themes. Regional dialects flourished, with London, Midlands, and Northern variants contributing to the language's evolution. Key figures like Geoffrey Chaucer (*Canterbury Tales*) and works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* showcase the period's literary achievements, often exploring chivalry, love, morality, and the human condition, heavily influenced by Christian theology and societal norms. Poetic styles included alliterative verse and rhyme, gradually shifting towards more structured forms, while the rise of prose broadened literary accessibility.

The beginnings of the Great Vowel Shift, a major phonetic change impacting Modern English pronunciation, also occurred during this time. Finally, significant social and political transformations, including the feudal system, a burgeoning middle class, and various rebellions, profoundly impacted the literature and overall cultural landscape of Middle English.

During the writing of *Ormulum* (c. 1150 – c. 1180), the blending of both Old English and Anglo-Norman elements in English are highlighted for the first time, marking the beginning of the Middle English period.

Around the turn of the thirteenth century, Layamon wrote his *Brut*, based on Wace's twelfth century Anglo-Norman epic of the same name.

Other transitional works were preserved as popular entertainment, including a variety of romances and lyrics. With time, the English language regained prestige, and in 1362 it replaced French and Latin in Parliament and courts of law. Early examples of Middle English literature are the *Ormulum*, *Havelock the Dane*, and Thomas of Hales's *Love Rune*.

The Mercian dialect thrived between the 8th and 13th centuries and was referred to by John Trevisa, writing in 1387.

When William the Conqueror took over England after the Norman Conquest, he began by exercising his reign and dispelling the English feudal system already in place. As the new king, William confiscated the lands from the current Saxon lords and apportioned them to the lords who had assisted his conquest. These lords, or tenants-in-chief, were to live on and work the lands while essentially 'renting' from William in exchange for various services. The tenants-in-chief could then rent parts of the land to lords beneath him and so on, leaving the commoners at the bottom to work the lands and raise the animals. Because the lands were still owned by William the Conqueror, he reserved the ability to remove any tenant-in-chief who did not lend his services to the king. This allowed William to keep absolute control over his kingdom and the people who lived there. In addition, a detailed record of ownership of land and people was kept in order to





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sort out the confusion of the new feudal system. This survey, also referred to as the Domesday Book, was to act as a permanent reference of belongings and tenants when William became king; he later required a reference to expand to the period before the Norman Conquest while Edward the Confessor ruled England in 1065. This record was to be collected by the squires and kept at the Winchester Treasury.

considered a tapestry but rather a piece of cloth—is approximately 70 meters long, and depicts the events leading up to the Norman Conquest and the Battle of Hastings. The current king of England, Edward the Confessor, was left childless and named Harold, Earl of Wessex, as his successor. Shortly after, Harold was invaded by William the Conqueror during the battle of Hastings. This tapestry shows approximately 50 scenes of the culmination of this battle and was eventually hung in the Bayeux Cathedral. This great work of art is often called upon in pop cultural reference and has been depicted in a number of movies and artistic events. The following website shows the tapestry scene by scene and provides a generous narration of the events.

Because of the vast difference of influential languages, various dialects arose throughout the country. Middle English includes a variety of Northumbria, West Saxon, Kentish, West Anglian, and East Anglian dialects. These dialects, formed in respective regions due to various influences makes it difficult to pin-point exact usage origins and dialects completely. What we do know is that this language system was completely different from anything England had ever used. Compared to the homogeneous language of Old English, Middle English gave us much of the English language we know and use today.

As far as grammar usage is concerned, the majority of the changes brought about through the conquest have much to do with inflection and spelling. Because those who chose to continue speaking English were forced to improvise depending on their region, they were forced to call upon Latin, French, and even Scandinavian traditions. Therefore, and incredible degree of variation is found in spelling, inflection, and vocabulary usage depending on regional variation. Because of these influences on the English language, much of the Old English morphology changed to become staple characteristics of the Middle English period. For example, the use of strong inflections was reduced and most nouns lost their gender identification.

Geoffery Chaucer is “Father of English Literature” Most famous for his work The Canterbury Tales but also noted for The Book of the Duchess, House of Fame, and Legend of Good Women. It is said that due to Chaucer’s status as a public figure, his writing was more widely accepted and his writing gave credibility to the English language.

William Caxton was a merchant who turned into a writer. He set up the first printing press in England in 1476. He acquired his knowledge of printing technique in Cologne,





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Germany. He then returned to England to apply what he had learned. He set up his press at Westminster, during his career as publisher he produced more than 90 editions of established and novice authors. Among the well-known were Chaucer (Cantebury tales), Gower (Confessio amantis), and Malory (Morte d'Arthur). Caxton prepared some translations of Latin and French, as well as wrote prefaces for his editions which revealed documents of literary attitudes in the late 15th century England

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