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Internet Resources for Middle English and Chaucer's Language

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This work aims at giving practical information on some sites dealing with Middle English language and, in particular, Chaucer's language. It is almost impossible to describe exhaustively what has been found on the subject because the web pages dedicated to it and consulted are manifold and the different links they propose are even more numerous. However, this can be a useful starting point for further research on the web. Here, only the most interesting pages – or considered as such for the purpose – are listed and described with examples taken from them.

The survey is divided into five sections concerning **1. General Introduction to Middle English and Chaucer's Language**, **2. Audio Files**, **3. Glossarial Databases**, **4. Conclusions**, **5. Appendix**. It is to be pointed out that the attention is mainly focused on Chaucer as one of the most important representatives of Middle English language and literature.

Even though the internet site addresses are given along with their description and evaluation, a final appendix has been added as an easier reference.

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO MIDDLE ENGLISH AND CHAUCER'S LANGUAGE

A general introduction to the Middle English language to be found on the web can be read in the electronic edition of *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*¹ published in January 2000 by Bartleby.com (New York).

¹ *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, Ward & Trent eds., *et al.*,

Middle English is treated in the first volume (From the Beginnings to the Cycles Romance), chapter XIX titled “Changes in the Language to the Days of Chaucer” by Henry Bradley. The sections dedicated to Middle English go from § 5. to § 15., each developing a specific linguistic aspect:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">5. Conjugation in Middle English6. Influence of the Norman Conquest7. Pronunciation and Spelling8. Middle English Spelling9. Development of Sounds10. Changes in Vocabulary11. Words adopted from French12. Scandinavian Words in English13. Loss of Native Words14. The Poetical Vocabulary15. English Dialects in the Fourteenth century |
|--|

The first three paragraphs give some general notions about the status of English during the period, while the following ones treat the matter in a more technical way according to the topics they deal with (see for ex. 8. and 9.), however, they do not exceed in particulars. The site is a link of <http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/medresource.htm> and offers an essential tool for those who first approach the matter or simply wish to get a clear – yet extremely general – view of Middle English.

Among the sites dealing with Middle English, and particularly Chaucer's language, the most interesting for both contents and organization, is undoubtedly <http://icg.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/index.html>, the Harvard Chaucer Page.

It is one of the best planned sites, easy to browse and useful to students approaching Middle English literature and Chaucer. Its tutorial pattern in proposing materials is clear but not restrictive. The site helps the user's choices, however it offers the possibility to select key words for further and more personal investigation. The home page presents the contents ranged in interactive boxes concerning the poet's life, his contemporaries, *The Canterbury Tales* (introduced, explained and commented), XIVth century socio-cultural

18 vols., New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons; England, Cambridge University Press, 1907-1921.

background and Chaucer's English. Great attention is dedicated to the final section: starting from introductory passages the student is led to links dealing with more specific linguistic material. From the home page, two are the possibilities offered to begin the search: the first, "Teach Yourself to Read Chaucer", proposes a series of lessons on Chaucer's language; the latter, from the box "Language & Linguistics", enters a more detailed menu.

"Teach Yourself to Read Chaucer". Choosing this option, an introductory page opens: here, the principles governing it and the objectives to be attained are clearly explained. The main goal is to make the student develop an elementary knowledge of Chaucer's English, of his grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation without dealing – at least for the moment – with his style, versification and literary qualities in general. Even though this site is clearly tutorial – and, for this reason, openly suggests internal or external links – the editors give the opportunity to choose more freely, according to the user's personal interests. This introduction provides for four links: 1. Interlinear translations of some tales (the Middle English text is taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*²) and 2. Quizzes – self-tests dealing with Chaucer's vocabulary –, besides the possibility of finding further material at the 3. Geoffrey Chaucer Website, to end up with the 4. Index of lessons:

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Lesson 1, The General Prologue, 1-18➤ Lesson 2, Pronouncing Chaucer's Middle English➤ Lesson 3, Chaucer's final -e➤ Lesson 4, Chaucer's Vocabulary➤ Lesson 5, Chaucer's Grammar➤ Lesson 6, The Shipman's Tale➤ Lesson 7, The General Prologue➤ Lesson 8, The Knight's Tale➤ Lesson 9, The Miller's, Reeve's, and Cook's Tales➤ Lesson 10, Reading more Tales |
|---|

The first five lessons deal with specific and essential linguistic aspects to get the necessary ability to read the texts that follow. Each lesson begins with an explanation of the subject associated with examples and systematic cross-references to audio files (internal or external to the site). The first lesson, for example, provides for both the reading and the listening of the *Canterbury Tales* incipit as well as links to "The Chaucer Meta Page Audio Files",

² *The Riverside Chaucer*, Larry D. Benson (ed.), Oxford, OUP, 1987.

discussed later on. The second lesson exemplifies the different phonological realization of Middle English *vs.* Modern English long vowels, ranging them in a table supplied with audio files and pronunciation exercises; the third lesson shows how the fall of *-e* in unstressed final syllables influenced pronunciation, syllabic division of words and, hence, versification: the examples are lines taken from the *Canterbury Tales*. To foster reading and comprehension the prosodic accents are marked and supported by audio files (note [click for sound](#) at the end of each excerpt):

The **dróghte** of **Márch** hath **pérced** **tó** the **róte**.

[Click for sound](#)

[...]

It is as important to omit the final *-e* when a vowel, *h-*, or *w-* follows as it is to pronounce it in other contexts:

Why artow angry with my **tale** now?

(MilPro (1).3157) [Click for sound](#)

Telle of a somonour swich a **tale** or two

(WBPro (3).842) [Click for sound](#)

In the first example, *tale* has two syllables; in the second a vowel follows *tale* and the *-e* is elided.

[...]

With all this in mind, read the following lines in Middle English. Those final *-e*'s that are to be pronounced are underlined; those that are to be omitted are enclosed in parentheses, as are vowels that should be slurred in words of more than two syllables. The final *-e*'s in lines 7-8 and 15-16 are marked for omission, but they may be pronounced (especially if one is reading very slowly).

Whán that Áprill wíth his shóures sóote
The dróght(*e*) of Márch hath pérced tó the róote.
And báthed év(*e*)ry véyn(*e*) in swích licóur
Of wích vertú engéndred ís the flóur;
Whan Zéphirús [...].³

Lessons four and five proceed as the previous ones and furnish valid

³ Harvard Chaucer Page, Lesson 3, pp. 1-3, prepared and maintained by L.D. Benson, Harvard University.

tools for memorization and learning; the schemes, links, theoretical explanations, examples, definitions of the most common chaucerian and Middle English terms are always contextualized, justified and, for this reason, relevant. The other five lessons deal with individual tales and have got a more practical character: at this stage, students should be able to read the selected tales, proposed according to an increasing degree of difficulty. It is worth noting how a paper copy of Middle English texts, with notes, glosses and other aids, is highly recommended. In fact, the electronic versions – in particular the interlinear versions – “supply merely a pony and by no means can they serve as a substitute for the original, [...]. These translations should be used for a first reading [...]. After you have gone through the interlinear text and have returned to this page, read the Shipman's Tale once more, this time in your printed text, and this time for pleasure rather than a drill on vocabulary”⁴.

“**Language & Linguistics**” is the other possibility offered by the Chaucer Home Page; by clicking on it a further menu, organized as follows, opens: 1. Sounds, Grammar, Vocabulary of Chaucer's Language; 2. The Middle English Language; 3. The Glossarial Database of Middle English; 4. Search the OED (Harvard only); 5. Search the MED at UMichigan. The first two titles are the only ones dealt with in this survey since they are the most interesting as far as Middle English and Chaucer's language are concerned.

“**The Middle English Language**” box introduces the linguistic situation in XIVth century England and does it by quoting passages – in Modern English translation – taken from original works written by Chaucer contemporaries, or previous authors, such as Robert of Gloucester's *Metrical Chronicle* (finished 1271), Robert Manning's *Story of England* (finished 1338), Hidgen's *Polychronicon* (translated from Latin to Middle English by Trevisa in 1385); this one can also be read in its Middle English version. The first section of the introduction ends with links to High Style, Borrowings from Latin & French and an essential bibliography concerning Chaucer's language and style (III. Language, Style, Metre. Derek Pearsall's Thirty Year Working Bibliography) where texts dealing with lexis, prosody, spelling, puns, grammar and Chaucer's English in general can be found. The latter section is organized as the preceding one – excerpts from original works – and distinguishes among Middle English dialect varieties (Middle English Dialects) exemplified by Chaucer's pilgrims and their characters and displayed by a map. The

⁴ Harvard Chaucer Page, Lesson 6, pp. 1-2, prepared and maintained by L.D. Benson, Harvard University

discussion ends with a quotation taken from Caxton's *Eneydos* (1490) where, once more, the typical linguistic fragmentation of both Middle English and post-Middle English periods is highlighted.

“Chaucer's Pronunciation, Grammar and Vocabulary” is a technical section, the subjects dealt with are not discussed but arranged in tables. The aim is to summarize and make clear some key points listed in a detailed index:

- | |
|-------------------------------|
| ➤ Vocabulary |
| ➤ Grammar |
| ➤ Pronunciation Home |
| 1 Long a |
| 2 Long close e |
| 3 Short e |
| 4 Long i |
| 5 Long o |
| 6 Long u |
| 7 Diphthongs ai & ei |
| 8 Diphthongs iu |
| 9 Diphthongs oi & oy |
| 10 Consonant clusters kn & cn |
| 11 Consonant cluster ch |
| 12 Consonant cluster r |
| ➤ Balade de bon Conseyl |

Each window opens on schemes which classify the parts of speech from a morphological, phonological and semantic points of view. “Vocabulary” distinguishes among Nouns, Adjectives, Verbs, Adverbs, Conjunctions, Prepositions, Demonstratives; for each of them, the most common chaucerian forms along with their meaning are outlined. “Grammar” focuses its attention on the fundamental morphological characteristics of Chaucer's language classifying Nouns, Personal Pronouns, Adjectives, Adverbs, Verbs, Preterites, Preterite Present, Impersonal Verbs, and exemplifying the various forms of nominal (regular, irregular, stem changes, etc.; singular, possessive, plural and meaning), pronominal (subject, possessive, object) and adjectival inflections (weak and strong; positive, comparative, superlative) as well as those pertaining to the verbal conjugation (indicative, subjunctive, singular and plural). Here as above, the information given is classified in boxes easy to read, understand and remember.

The section specifically dedicated to phonology has got many subentries,

as it may be inferred from the index "Pronunciation Home". Each subentry offers individual terms or complete lines reproduced by audio files to exemplify their pronunciation, the following examples are taken from "Long a":

| Section 1 | |
|--|---------------|
| Play the word or sentence; pronounce it aloud, and play it again to check your pronunciation. | |
| Long "a" – as in "Father" | |
| Single Word Breakdown | Play the Word |
| name | > |
| caas | > |
| harm | > |
| Short "a" – as in "patte" (In French) | |
| Single Word Breakdown | Play the Word |
| can | > |
| that | > |
| Long "a" and Short "a" – Sentence Examples | |
| <i>Now Certainly he was a fair prelaat He was nat pale as a forpyned goost (GP 204-205)</i> | > |
| <i>As leene was his hors as is a rake And he nas nat right fat, I undertake. (GP 287-288)</i> | > |

The last choice from the pronunciation index is the "Balade de bon Conseyl" which, entirely read in Middle English, exemplifies all that has been said so far. Four voices alternate to the reading and, for this reason, minimal differences in intonation and interpretation of sounds succeed one another. However, such differences are extremely useful to realize how it can be difficult to interpret a language presumably spoken by people living many a century ago and how a unique model cannot exist, above all at an oral level.

2. AUDIO FILES

As far as audio files are concerned, another interesting site to start from is “An annotated guide to online resources” (<http://geoffreychaucer.org>) edited by David Wilson-Okamura (Macalester College). He provides a list of web pages, briefly commented and classified according to their topics. The home page contains a thematic index also including the section Language; by clicking on it a detailed menu opens and presents a series of links dedicated to Chaucer’s English. The attention focuses on audio files, essential tools to learn Middle English pronunciation.

“**The Chaucer Meta Page Audio Files**”, created and maintained by Alan Baragona – VMI Dept. of English and Fine Arts, is among the richest pages consulted. It offers a wide range of texts read by different scholars and taken from chaucerian works such as *The Canterbury Tales* (most of them), *The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, etc.

The site (http://academics.vmi.edu/english/audio_index.html) is well organized and easy to browse. Each audio file is associated with its written version which can clearly be read on the screen along with the voice interpreting it. It is necessary to download Real Audio Format, linked to the site. The electronic excerpts are taken from the most used editions of Chaucer’s works, such as L. Benson’s *The Canterbury Tales Complete* (based on *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edn., Houghton, Mifflin, 2000); F.N. Robinson’s *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1957); J.H. Fisher’s *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1977); and the relevant sections of E. Talbot Donaldson’s *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. This site is highly recommended.

“**The Chaucer Studio Recordings**”, at the University of Adelaide and the Brigham Young University, is an excellent site to find audio materials (<http://humanities.byu.edu/chaucer/>). Not only readings from Chaucer and his contemporaries may be listened to, but audio tapes can also be purchased. The readings have been recorded on the occasion of conferences organized by the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ANZAMRS), by the New Chaucer Society (NCS) and by independent lectures. The Chaucer Studio declares itself to be a non-profit association (the interpreters are teachers and students reading for free) whose aim is merely the production of pedagogical material. Hence, these recordings are teaching aids exemplifying those changes in English pronunciation at various stages of its evolution (from OE to ME) and interpreting texts originally produced for oral delivery. The home page lists the topics in a well

provided index including, for example, Chaucer: Early Works/The Canterbury Tales, Middle English Other Than Chaucer, Old English, etc.; by clicking on them, more detailed indexes list the texts. Here, besides the title, the readers' name, the occasion and the date of record are documented. Each file lasts from 15 to 35 seconds and sometimes the reading is accompanied by the music of the period. Among non-chaucerian texts the range is rich enough: *Dame Sirith*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, Layamon's *Brut*, ME Lyrics, *The Fox and the Wolf*, *Sir Orfeo* (with music), *Pearl*, etc. The site is really rich and easy to browse, notwithstanding the fact that passages are not readable on the screen.

From Wilson-Okamura's site is also possible to listen directly to some audio files without connecting to the Chaucer Meta Page or Chaucer Studio Recordings. Some of them are easily accessible, such as *The General Prologue*, vv. 1-18, read by Tom Hanks from Baylor University; *The General Prologue*, vv. 1-44, read by Jane Zatta; the *Pardoner's Tale*, vv. 716-749, read by Alfred David (in this case it is not necessary to download Real Audio Format, even though the audio file is reproduced with that application); *The General Prologue*, vv. 1-44, and *Troilus and Criseyde*, 5.1786-1841, read by Linda Ehram Voigts (<http://www.umkc.edu/lib/engelond/prologue.htm> or <http://www.umkc.edu/lib/engelond/troilus.htm>) from the University of Missouri. As it was the case with the texts proposed by the Chaucer Meta Page, it is possible to follow the oral interpretation reading the passage on the screen (here, Real Audio Format is required).

Okamura also furnishes the link to "Middle English Pronunciation Guidelines" site; here, in an extremely summarized way, both some Middle English consonant clusters of sounds and long vowels are read in isolated terms (<http://www.jsu.edu/depart/english/treed/chpronounce.htm>).

3. GLOSSARIAL DATABASES

Okamura is also the starting point for other sites dealing with Chaucer's English and, in particular, for those pages dedicated to lexis. The links listed there can serve as a valid means to enter more or less complete glossaries of Chaucer's vocabulary. There are essentially three sites worth mentioning: the first, edited by Edwin Duncan from Towson University

(<http://www.towson.edu/~duncan/glossary.html>), is *A Basic Chaucer Glossary* containing the most common terms used by the poet. It is a two-page glossary where Middle English forms are coupled and defined with the Modern English ones.

The second is a *Glossarial Database of Middle English*, edited by professor Larry D. Benson (<http://www.hti.umich.edu/english/gloss>), introduced by a detailed explanation for its use. Such a Glossary helps – by a research browser – to locate every single word in the *Canterbury Tales*, to reckon its occurrence and, if necessary, to restrict search selecting options such as *Language* (All, English, Latin, French, Greek), *Form* (All forms, Grammatical, Inflected, Both), *Fulltext*, *Analysis*, *Lemma*; however, advanced and combined search is difficult to perform. The results are visualized on the screen and organized according to the options required before search. This kind of tool could be used for a quantitative/qualitative research on Chaucer's lexis.

The third and last database is the *Middle English Glossarial Database*, hosted at the Harvard Chaucer Page. It concentrates on Chaucer's and Gower's works to locate individual terms, but it is not easy to use and no explanations are given. On the Harvard Chaucer Page, there are two other links which deserve to be mentioned, although their use is restricted to authorized users only (for example, to those people who got a password from the library): "Search the OED" (Harvard only) and "Search the MED at UMichigan".

4. CONCLUSIONS

All that has been presented in this survey testifies to the rich supply of linguistic material which can be found online. Among the great variety of the visited sites, some are more complete and more absorbing than others for both amount and detail of the information given, for the suggested courses and for their interactive character, stimulating further study.

As far as linguistic site evaluation is concerned, the Harvard Chaucer Page must be called to the users' attention once more. It is the richest source for both its multifarious contents – all of them analysed at different levels: morphological, phonological, lexical, semantic, syntactic, literary, etc. – and their treatment. What is also worth mentioning is its endless reference to the necessary paper copies of literary critical editions and the suggestion to read literary works of the past in their original linguistic varieties (the effective

reason to learn those technical data otherwise perceived as barren if not associated with the approach to the text).

The other sites under scrutiny here concentrate on the oral production and hence on those texts read aloud by scholars and students of Middle English. This kind of approach is certainly a valid one, above all when the listening exercise is associated with the corresponding written passages. However, it is to be pointed out that such aids are to be considered as additional tools supporting a previous and more technical linguistic study.

It is clearly a good opportunity for web users to enjoy such interactive materials as a starting point for personal study. Most of the passages are oral reproduction of literary works: in a sense, they represent both an effort to revive the oral quality typical of Middle English literature – and medieval literature in general – and the fundamental interaction between narrator and audience which made the literary experience a shared and common one.

5. APPENDIX

<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/medresource.htm>

<http://icg.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/index.html>

<http://geoffreychaucer.org>

http://academics.vmi.edu/english/audio_index.html

<http://humanities.byu.edu/chaucer/>

<http://www.umkc.edu/lib/engelond/prologue.htm>

<http://www.umkc.edu/lib/engelond/troilus.htm>

<http://www.jsu.edu/depart/english/treed/chpronounce.htm>

<http://www.towson.edu/~duncan/glossary.html>

<http://www.hti.umich.edu/english/gloss>