Standards Focus: Middle English and the Great Vowel Shift

In a break from tradition, Chaucer wrote his tales in Middle English, which was the language of the commoners living in England in the 1300s. His contemporaries were writing in French or Italian. Chaucer’s use of Middle English was an odd choice for several reasons, including the lack of literacy among those who spoke Middle English, the reputation of French and Latin for being romantic languages, and the fact that the reigning monarchs in England spoke French. It would be logical to assume that a poet who wanted to have his works published and read would address them to the portion of the population most likely to read them, but that was not the case with Chaucer.

Despite his divergence from custom and his appeal to the lower classes, Chaucer was still supported by the monarchy. His long time patron John of Gaunt was the fourth son of King Edward III, and it was he who introduced Chaucer’s Middle English poetry to society when he commissioned Chaucer to write a poem in memory of his first wife Blanche. In addition to John of Gaunt, both King Edward III and King Richard II supported Chaucer through appointments to government positions. It is also said that King Richard II was a strong supporter of the arts in general and Chaucer’s work specifically.

Middle English evolved from the previously spoken Old English. Old English was developed around the 5th century when the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons invaded and merged their languages with the Latin that was left over from the Roman occupation. Over time, different countries invaded, the monarchy changed houses, and the language continued to evolve. The language and vocabulary started to change again in 1066 when the Normans under William the Conqueror took the crown and brought in a French influence. By the time Middle English was spoken in the fourteenth century, many vocabulary words had been adopted from the French: vowel sounds started to grow shorter and the pronunciation of words changed.

Just as the language did not remain constant over the years, it also did not remain constant over the terrain. Eventually, five different dialects developed throughout England. A person who spoke Middle English in one part of the country would find a conversation with a person who spoke Middle English from a different part of the country to be challenging because of the different dialects. Due to Chaucer’s work with Middle English, the London dialect became the predominant version of Middle English and the precursor of the English spoken today.

For years between the beginning of Old English and the early development of Middle English, language separated the social classes. Commoners and those who did not engage in trade would have spoken one of the dialects of Middle English, whereas those who were of the upper class would have spoken French. Some might have learned more than one language or dialect, such as those who were engaged in trade and needed the languages to do business, those who were educated like Chaucer, and those who were Catholic and were taught just enough Latin to follow the church service and participate in sacramental events. By Chaucer’s time, Middle English was developing, and it was Chaucer’s efforts that helped bring Middle English to the forefront of English culture.

From Old English to Middle English, the evolution of the language has continued to develop into what we now know as Modern English. You may be surprised to learn that the English spoken today actually began in Shakespeare’s time. Shakespeare spoke Early Modern English whereas we speak Late Modern English.
Below is a passage from the General Prologue. On the left is the original form in which Chaucer wrote the poem. On the right is a modern translation written and published by Nevill Coghill in 1951. Try to pronounce the words in the Middle English version. The spelling indicates a different pronunciation from the modern version. Even with the different spelling, if sounded out, the words still sound a little familiar.

**Middle English**

When that aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
Tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(so priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of engelond to caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke

**Modern Translation**

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the Ram has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints hallowed in sundry lands,
And specially, from every shire’s end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick

**Great Vowel Shift**

The difference between the sound of Middle English and the sound of the modern translation is due to the Great Vowel Shift. The shifted vowel refers to long vowels, whose sounds are “held” longer than the others. In the first line, whan has become when and soote has transformed into today’s sweet. The vowels that were not held for as long have not had the same significant change. Look through the Middle English version for sounds that are still the same.

This shift in pronunciation did not happen overnight; it took many years for this shift to occur. Think about one of Shakespeare’s works. The language used by Shakespeare is a little different from today in structure, but most of the sounds are more familiar than those from Chaucer’s time. Shakespeare wrote his plays in the late 1500s and early 1600s, approximately 200 years after The Canterbury Tales.

Even the English that is used today is evolving the way Middle English evolved after the Great Vowel Shift. Think about words that are used every day and then think about how those words appear in textbooks or how they sound when pronounced in different settings. One example is the word alright. The traditional pronunciation sounds like “all rɪt” with two separate syllables. In an informal setting, however, this term sounds more like “ahɪt” with very little enunciation distinguishing the two syllables and a less pronounced “I” sound. There are many other words that have been changed over the past few decades. Try to think of a few. Suddenly, the idea of the Great Vowel Shift does not seem so strange. Years from now, students may be studying the Great Vowel Shift of the 21st Century!
Exploring Expository Writing: Middle English and the Great Vowel Shift

Directions: After reading the article on Middle English and the Great Vowel Shift, complete the following activity. Write your answers in complete sentences on a separate piece of paper.

Part A

1. Prior to Chaucer, poets wrote primarily in
   a. Old English
   b. French
   c. Russian
   d. Modern English

2. Chaucer’s use of Middle English was controversial because
   a. the English monarchs and nobility spoke French
   b. people from other countries would not be able to read his poems
   c. Middle English was the language reserved for the religious people
   d. the shift from Olde English to Middle English was abrupt so no one could understand Chaucer’s work

3. Middle English started to develop as a result of
   a. King Edward III’s decree that French was to be outlawed
   b. William the Conqueror’s use of French in the monarchy
   c. the invasion of the Angles, Saxons, and Normans
   d. John of Gaunt, when he commissioned Chaucer to write a poem for his wife

4. The Great Vowel Shift happened
   a. during Shakespeare’s time
   b. slowly over a long period of time
   c. while Chaucer was touring Italy so when he returned to England, he had difficulty understanding the commoners
   d. as a result of a coup that put a Celtic king on the throne

5. The vowels affected by the Great Vowel Shift include
   a. anything that looks even remotely like a vowel
   b. only those vowels that make a long a as in neighbor or weigh
   c. only vowels preceded by the consonants m, n, or b.
   d. only the vowels that are held for a long time and are considered long vowels

Part B

6. What happened as a result of Chaucer’s choice to use Middle English instead of French?

7. Identify five elements involved in the development of the English language up to Chaucer’s time.

8. When else in history might one see this type of change in language?

9. Explain how one’s use of language in Chaucer’s time could reveal one’s social status.

10. What conditions contribute to cause a shift in language such as the Great Vowel Shift?