Middle English vocabulary

- 10,000 French words entered Middle English vocabulary;

- Law and administration, medicine, art and fashion (3/4 still used today);

- New French words substituted the Old English ones, but in most cases the two versions co-existed;

- XIV-XV century: new flux of Latin words (1348: John Wycliffe's *Bible*) → sets of 3 words expressing the same concept (e.g. Old English 'time', French 'age', Latin 'epoch') with the Old English version being 'popular', the French one literary and the Latin one learned

Middle English grammar, spelling and pronunciation

○ Declensions finally died away (except the possessive 's and some accusative forms of personal pronouns) → word order becomes strict;

○ Verb endings remained the same (present –s and past tense –ed simplification occurred after Middle English);

○ Some irregular verbs became regular;

○ –s was employed for most plural nouns;

○ Spelling changed a lot thanks to Norman scribes who didn't understand Old English sounds (e.g. cw → qu; c → ch; thorn þ, eth ð and ash æ disappeared);

○ Some words beginning with /h/ dropped the /h/ sound.

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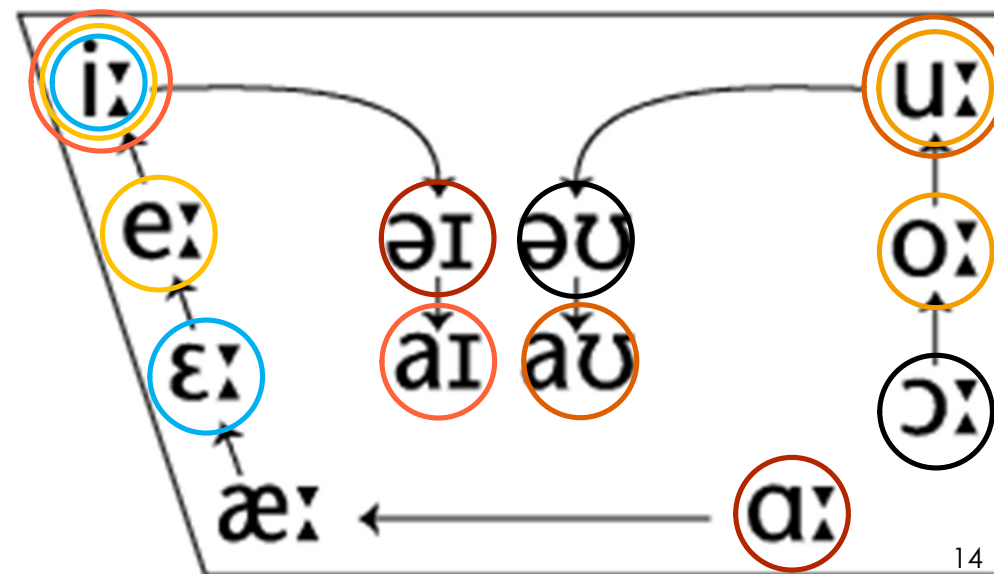
Middle English literary output

XIV century:

1. *Sir Gawayne an the Grene Knight* (c. 1350);

2. Langland's *Piers Plowman* (c. 1360);

3. *Pearl* (c. 1375);

4. Wycliffe's *Bible* (1382-1395);

5. **Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (most important achievement in Middle English) – 1387-1400 (published 1476)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVG77xTPH6E

The Great Vowel Shift

- 1400-1600: 7 long vowels of Middle English varied (higher and forward) very quickly → pronunciation changed;

- 1476: Caxton brought printing in England → spelling was fixed;

- **As a consequence, while pronunciation evolves even today, we use the same spelling Chaucer used!**
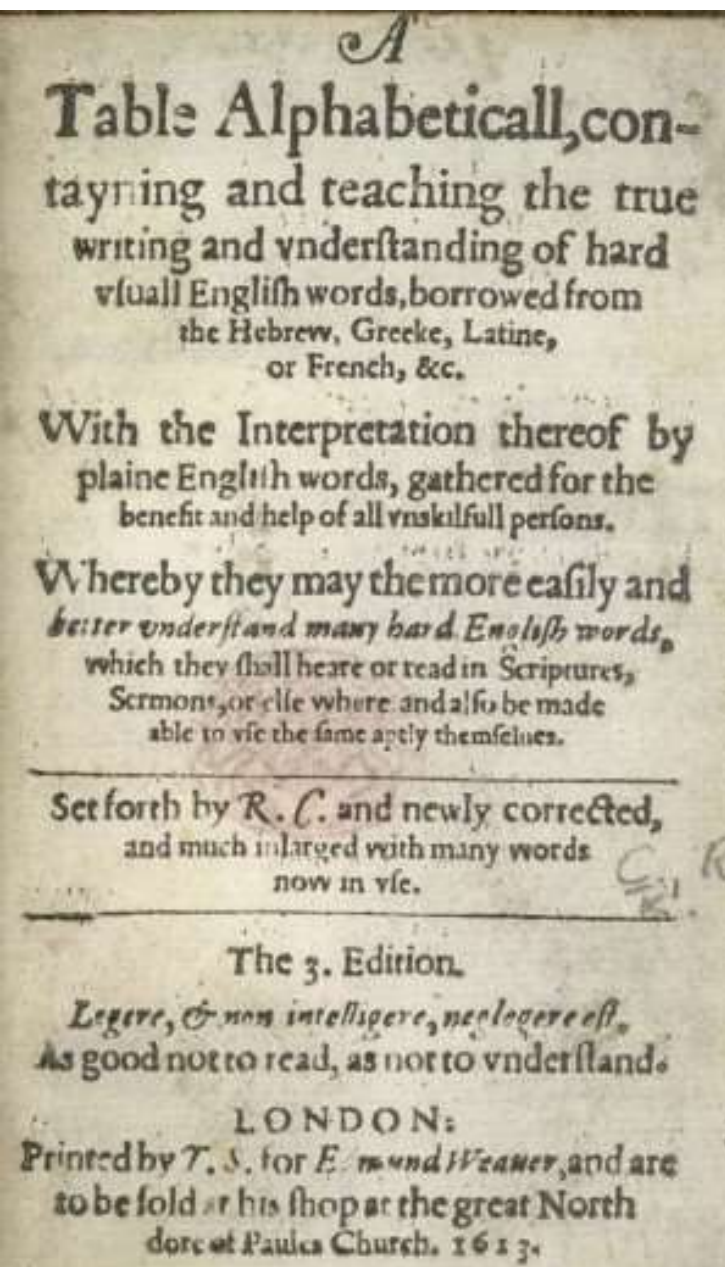

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Middle English dialects: towards standard English

- East Midland dialect at the base of modern standard English ('Golden triangle': London, Oxford and Cambridge);

- Agricultural area and wool trade;

- Bridge between Northern and Southern dialects;

- Caxton set up his printing press in Westminster, London

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A Table Alphabeticall, contayning and teaching the true writing and vnderstanding of hard vsuall English words, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c.

With the Interpretation thereof by plaine English words, gathered for the benefit and help of all vnskilfull persons.

Whereby they may the more easily and better vnderstand many hard English words, which they shall heare or read in Scriptures, Sermons, or else where: and also be made able to vse the same aptly themselues.

Set forth by *R. C.* and newly corrected, and much inlarged with many words now in vse.

The 3. Edition.

Legere, & non intelligere, neglegere est.
As good not to read, as not to vnderstand.

LONDON:
Printed by *T. S.* for *Edmund Weauer*, and are to be sold at his shop at the great North dore of Paules Church. 1613.

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(Early) Modern English (1)

○ XVI century: scholars begin to talk about language (Cheke proposed to eliminate all the silent letters in 1569, Bullokar proposed a new alphabet of 37 letters in 1560, and in 1604 Cadrey published a first, rudimental modern English dictionary, *A Table Alphabeticall*);

○ Standard English had to be defined if people wanted to understand what books contained;

○ This process took 100 years (XVII century)

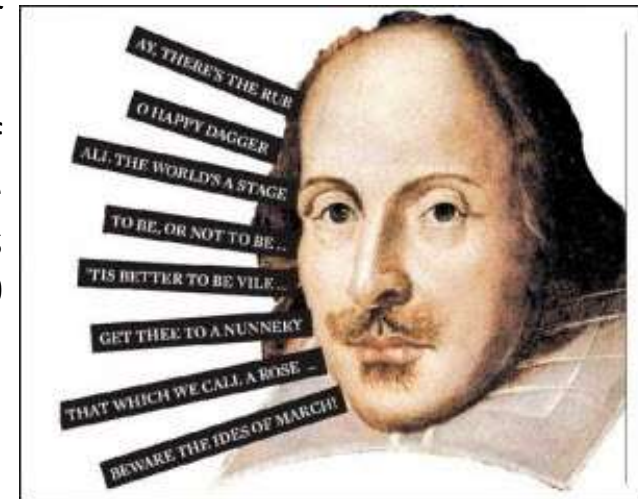# (Early) Modern English (2): The Renaissance

- From Caxton (XV century) to mid-XVII century (Cromwell's civil war);
- Interest for new publications and Latin and Greek classics;
- Double tendency: 'inkhorn' terms (new words from over 50 foreign languages come into English through affixation and conversion), Chaucerism (willingness to revive obsolete English words);
- Latin was used by scientists and in the XVII century by the Church (only Catholic)

(Early) Modern English (3): Shakespeare and the *Bible*

- Two main influences of the time (apart from Caxton's printing press): works by William Shakespeare and the *Authorized Version* of the *Bible* (or *King James's Bible*, 1611);

- Shakespeare introduced a lot of idioms (e.g. 'It's Greek to me', 'Make a virtue of necessity', etc.) – his vocabulary was of about 20,000 words;

- The language in *King James's Bible* (and consequently in the *Book of the Common Prayer*, 1549 and 1662, this latter the version we still use today) is more conservative – 8,000 words, look backwards in grammar

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYiYd9RcK5M&t=25s

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(Early) Modern English (4): Shakespeare vs. *Bible*

- Irregular verbs still have their old forms in the *Bible* (e.g. 'spake' for 'spoke' or 'holpen' for 'helped');
- Old words are still in use; no use of 'do' in questions or negative form (Shakespeare alternates);
- The northern form of the 3rd person's –s is found sometimes in Shakespeare, but the *Bible* still always uses –eth;
- 2nd person singular subject pronoun was *thou*, the object *thee*, the possessive adj. *thy* and the possessive pronoun *thine*;
- 2nd person plural subject pronoun was *ye*, the object *you*, the possessive adj. *your* and the possessive pronoun *yours*;
- *His* was used also for *its*;
- *Will* was found only in informal context (so in Shakespeare), *shall* was used in formal contexts;
- Double superlatives (e.g. the most highest);
- Prepositions were used differently