MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES
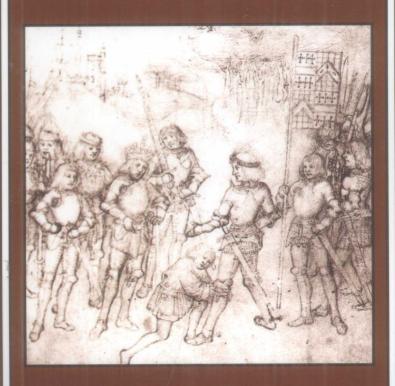
SELECTED AND EDITED BY
STEPHEN H. A. SHEPHERD

MIDDLE ENGLISH
ROMANCES

AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS

SOURCES AND BACKGROUNDS

CRITICISM

Selected and Edited by

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Preface

I was reading a sign high on the wall behind the bar:

I was trying to count how many *lies* could be found in those nine words, and had reached four, with promise of more, when one of my confederates . . . cleared his throat with the noise of a gasoline engine's backfire.[1]

I would encourage anyone picking up *Middle English Romances* to follow the lead of Hammett's Continental Op and distinguish in its wholly traditional title a clutch of lies. That the majority of texts in this volume are written in *Middle English* is perhaps the closest thing to a truth suggested by the title—though *Havelok*, about 700 years old, can be considered an example of "Early Middle" English, and the *Capystranus*, printed in the reign of Henry VIII, is arguably an example of "Early Modern" English.

That the seven principal texts are *English*, in the sense of having an exclusive origin in England, is certainly a lie. As the Sources and Backgrounds section is intended to illustrate, all in one way or another have continental, Anglo-Norman, or Celtic antecedents; for some, the link is made through Middle English intermediaries; and others may bear an even fainter impress of dependence as composites of tradition and motif rather than as translations and adaptations of identifiable texts; but none exists in splendid isolation. This is not to say that there is nothing uniquely English about them—to the contrary, they have been selected largely because they have no peer—but responsibly to speak of them as English texts presupposes a sensitivity to that which they inherit from other places, and times. It is for this reason that, in taking advantage of the special format of the Norton Critical Editions, I have given over more space than is usual to sources and analogues, against reprinted criticism. In so doing, I have endeavored to supply nearly all of the relevant texts in as complete a form as possible; besides those self-contained passages which, like the Havelok episode in Gaimar or the selections from the *Gesta Romanorum*, have been excised in contiguous

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1. Dashiell Hammett, "The Golden Horseshoe," in *The Continental Op* (New York, 1974), p. 69 (I refer to the most common edition, though the short story was first published in 1924).

form, the only real exception to the practice is the sampling of Chrétien's *Yvain*, which poem is otherwise prohibitively long and of which several good translations are readily available.

That the principal texts of the collection are *Romances* is perhaps the most obvious lie of all. For some time it has been a commonplace for editors of Middle English "romances" to remark upon the inadequacy of inclusive definitions for the ostensible genre; the one hundred or more[2] so-called romances in Middle English present an extraordinary variety of form and theme to which no single critical paradigm is usefully equal. Indeed, an abiding sense of generic *distinction* is surely to be encouraged in the apprehension of these texts. It is to this end that I indicate in the table of contents an arrangement of the selected poems according to four different categories. So to replace one generalizing term with yet others may of course be to replace one set of lies with others—and it is not difficult to see, for instance, that all of the selected texts have their fair share of "trial and ordeal," that the impressionable Charlemagne of *The Sege off Melayne* is subjected to some rough "nurture and correction" at the hands of Turpin, that Havelok (with cross on chest) engages in a kind of "holy war" against Godard and Godrich, and so on. Such distinctions as are suggested, then, are intended only as distinctions of a perceived emphasis. And the standard against which the emphasis is measured (arbitrary though the standard itself may be) reflects fairly well-established ideas of the kind advanced in the first two critical essays printed in the back of this volume, especially those advanced by Erich Auerbach. Auerbach finds the hero's process to "self-realization" or "personal perfection" as the essential action of the ideal romance (pp. 420–22). The categories of the table of contents thus suggest how the selected texts represent gradations away from an interest in that kind of action. I trust that the categories will in the main be taken as polemical, though I hasten to add that it is doubtful whether any Middle English "romance" conforms satisfactorily to the Auerbachian paradigm—compare the essay by John Finlayson.

Each of the seven principal texts needs no introduction—each has been edited before and each has in its own right continued to attract scholarly attention—and I think it safe to say that each represents the work of confident, spirited, and intelligent minds. Whether, as a group, and given their evident variety, the poems are sufficiently representative of what French and Hale called "the first large body of English fiction"[3] is hard to say; but most, together with the related Sources and Backgrounds material, at the very least have the advantage of shedding light on other works which students of medieval English literature are likely

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2. A useful guide to the number and content of the Middle English texts commonly identified as romances is to be found in the first volume of *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, J. Burke Severs, general ed. (New Haven, 1967).
3. Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale, eds., *Middle English Metrical Romances* (New York, 1930), 2 vols., I, v.

to encounter. *Ywain and Gawain, The Awntyrs off Arthure,* and *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen,* for instance, can provide an invaluable sense of context for students of the *Gawain* poet, and possibly also of Malory. The *Weddyng* has further attractions for those wishing to improve their understanding of the peculiar genius of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale, and the first part of *The Awntyrs* warrants comparison with sections of *Piers Plowman;* it is also worth noting that the *Weddyng* and the *Awntyrs* are analogues to one another. *Havelok* and *The Sege off Melayne* can be studied as the heirs, in differing ways perhaps, of more distant heroic traditions manifest in such texts as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon.* *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Launfal,* as "Breton lays," can make invaluable complements to a reading of Chaucer's Franklin's Tale.

Each of the Sources and Backgrounds sections corresponding to the seven principal texts is prefaced with an introductory headnote. The headnotes are intended to establish the relevance of the sources or analogues printed thereafter; they aim to give a practical account of what is currently known about the principal text's provenance and to suggest ways in which comparison with the relevant sources and analogues might reveal something about the author's (or translator's or adaptor's) intentions. I must stress that the headnotes are not intended to provide an account of the state of the critical art as it applies to any other aspects of the texts in question; the Selected Bibliography will provide a start for students wishing to explore such matters further, and no doubt instructors will wish anyway to assign other readings according to their own preferences.

As an additional practical help to those interested in the circumstances generally of these texts' composition and their circulation, I have included essays by A. C. Baugh and Gisela Guddat-Figge. Baugh's essay provides a very helpful introduction to the nature of oral-formulaic composition and its influence on written texts; among other things, the essay will help students to see how the conventionalities of a Middle English text are not signs of incompetence (let alone plagiarism) but rather are valued constituents of meaning. Guddat-Figge's essay should assist those with questions about the relationship between the oral and literary manifestations of the (so-called) romances; I hope also that the essay will allow students to begin to see the relevance of manuscript studies to the understanding of texts which they otherwise only ever meet through printed editions.

All editions of Middle English texts in this volume are mine and have been prepared from manuscript or photographic reproductions thereof. The characters þ and ȝ have been modernized (the former to *th* and the latter to *gh, y,* or *z),* as has the use of *u* and *v, i* and *j* (and the first-person pronoun is rendered as *I* where manuscripts have Y); manuscript abbreviations are expanded silently. Otherwise, and excepting the cor-

rection of obvious scribal errors (notably in the case of damaged rhyme),[+] the orthography of the base manuscripts has not been excessively regularized; in cases where this may present difficulties, I have employed marginal glosses or explanatory footnotes. Word division, punctuation, and capitalization are editorial. Where possible, I have followed the base manuscripts in matters of paragraphing and the distinction of larger divisions of text. I have identified within square brackets editorial emendations to the base text only where I diverge from the usual practice of the standard scholarly editions; readings incorporated from a manuscript other than that of the base text are, however, always set within brackets and the source manuscript identified. Where the exigencies of Middle English prosody may present special problems for beginning students— as in the cases of unfamiliar word order, shifts of tense within one sentence, omission of verbs and relative pronouns, and multiple negatives—I hope to have erred on the side of caution in the quantity of explanatory apparatus. Persistently difficult words and phrases, and potential "false friends" (such as *in-fere*, "together"), are reglossed roughly every one hundred lines.

I am grateful to several libraries for permission to transcribe from their manuscripts; the specific contributions of each library are acknowledged in the titular footnotes to each edition. I am also grateful to several people who have made it possible to improve this volume in ways that I could not have envisioned alone; in particular I am grateful to Carrie Copeland, Lee Gibson, Douglas Gray, M. L. Lawhon, D. B. Lenck, Maldwyn Mills, Roger Pensom, and Helen Phillips. To Carol Bemis, my editor at W. W. Norton, go innumerable thanks for her care over this project since its inception. Above all, I must thank my mother for her inspired and well-timed encouragement as the hours of editing went by.

[+]. What to modern eyes may appear to be only approximate rhyme has, however, been retained. For a helpful study of the rhyming practices of medieval English poets, see E. G. Stanley, "Rhymes in English Medieval Verse: From Old English to Middle English," in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, E. D. Kennedy, R. Waldron, and J. S. Wittig, eds. (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 19–54.

Reading Middle English[†]

The chief difficulty with Middle English for the modern reader is caused not by its inflections so much as by its spelling, which may be described as a rough-and-ready phonetic system, and by the fact that it is not a single standardized language but consists of a number of regional dialects each with its own peculiarities of sound and its own systems for representing sounds in writing. The Midland dialect—the dialect of London and of *Sir Launfal, The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell,* and (to a lesser extent) *Havelok,* which is the ancestor of our own standard speech—differs greatly from the dialect spoken in the west of England (*Sir Orfeo* appears originally to have been written in a southwestern dialect), from that of the northwest (*The Awntyrs off Arthure*), and from that of the north (*Ywain and Gawain, The Sege off Melayne*), and these dialects differ from one another. The remarks that follow apply chiefly to Midland English; non-Midland dialectal variations are regularly glossed in the editions where they appear.

I. The Sounds of Middle English: General Rules

Though preserved for us only in written form, most of the Middle English texts in this volume show signs of having been circulated orally at some time in their history, and a number make appeals to a listening audience. Such appeals may, of course, reflect only the artifice of convention, but the inherent drama of the rhetorical flourishes and frequent exchanges of direct discourse which characteristically imbue these pieces in any case makes for poetry which is at its best when read aloud. The following general analysis of the sounds of Middle English will enable the reader who has not time for detailed study to read Middle English aloud so as to preserve some of its most essential characteristics, without, however, giving heed to many important details. The next section, "Detailed Analysis," is designed for the reader who wishes to go more deeply into the pronunciation of Middle English. Middle English differs from Modern English in three principal respects: (1) the pronunciation of the long vowels *a, e, i* (or *y*), *o,* and *u* (spelled *ou, ow*); (2) the fact

that Middle English final *e* is often sounded; and (3) the fact that all Middle English consonants are sounded.

1. LONG VOWELS

Middle English vowels are long when they are doubled (*aa, ee, oo*) or when they are terminal (*he, to, holy*); *a, e,* and *o* are long when followed by a single consonant plus a vowel (*name, mete, note*). Middle English vowels are short when they are followed by two consonants.

Long *a* is sounded like the *a* in Modern English "father": *maken, waast* (waist).

Long *e* may be sounded like the *a* in Modern English "name" (ignoring the distinction between the close and open vowel): *be, fleen* (flee).

Long *i* (or *y*) is sounded like the *i* in Modern English "machine": *lif, whit; myn, holy.*

Long *o* may be sounded like the *o* in Modern English "note" (again ignoring the distinction between the close and open vowel): *do, sone* (soon).

Long *u* (spelled *ou, ow*) is sounded like the *oo* in Modern English "goose": *obout* (about), *rownde.*

Note that in general Middle English long vowels are pronounced like long vowels in modern languages other than English. Short vowels and diphthongs, however, may be pronounced as in Modern English.

2. FINAL *E*

In Middle English syllabic verse, final *e* is sounded like the *a* in "sofa" to provide a needed unstressed syllable: *Blessed be that ilkë thrawë / That thou hire toke in Godes lawë!* (*Havelok,* ll. 1215–16). But final *e* is suppressed when not needed for the meter (cf. *hire* in the example). It is commonly silent before words beginning with a vowel or *h*.

3. CONSONANTS

Middle English consonants are pronounced separately in all combinations—*gnat: g-nat; knave: k-nave; write: w-rite; folk: fol-k.* In a simplified system of pronunciation the combination *gh* as in *night* or *thought* may be treated as if it were silent.

II. *The Sounds of Middle English: Detailed Analysis*

1. SIMPLE VOWELS

Sound	Pronunciation	Example
long *a* (spelled *a, aa*)	*a* in "father"	*maken, waast*
short *a*	*o* in "hot"	*swapped*
long *e* close (spelled *e, ee*)	*a* in "name"	*be, sweete*

Sound	Pronunciation	Example
long *e* open (spelled *e, ee*)	*e* in "there"	*mete, eeres*
short *e*	*e* in "set"	*hem*
final *e*	*a* in "sofa"	*ilke*
long *i* (spelled *i, y*)	*i* in "machine"	*I, ride*
short *i*	*i* in "in"	*in*
long *o* close (spelled *o, oo*)	*o* in "note"	*sone, goode*
long *o* open (spelled *o, oo*)	*oa* in "broad"	*go, foos*
short *o*	*o* in "oft"	*of*
long *u* when spelled *ou, ow*	*oo* in "goose"	*hous, flowre*
long *u* when spelled *u*	*u* in "pure"	*vertu*
short *u* (spelled *u, o*)	*u* in "full"	*ful, love*

Doubled vowels and terminal vowels are always long, whereas single vowels before two consonants other than *th* and *ch* are always short. The vowels *a*, *e*, and *o* are long before a single consonant followed by a vowel: *nāë, sēkë* (sick), *hōly*. In general, words that have descended into Modern English reflect their original Middle English quantity: *līven* (to live), but *līf* (life).

The close and open sounds of long *e* and long *o* may often be identified by the Modern English spellings of the words in which they appear. Original long close *e* is generally represented in Modern English by *ee*: "sweet," "knee," "teeth," "see" have close *e* in Middle English, but so does "be"; original long open *e* is generally represented in Modern English by *ea*: "meat," "heath," "sea," "great," "breath" have open *e* in Middle English. Similarly, original long close *o* is now generally represented by *oo*: "soon," "food," "good," but also "do," "to"; original long open *o* is represented either by *oa* or by *o*: "coat," "boat," "moan," but also "go," "bone," "foe," "home." Notice that original close *o* is now almost always pronounced like the *oo* in goose, but that original open *o* is almost never so pronounced; thus it is often possible to identify the Middle English vowels through Modern English sounds.

The nonphonetic Middle English spelling of *o* for short *u* has been preserved in a number of Modern English words ("love," "son," "come"), but in others *u* has been restored: "sun" (*sonne*), "run" (*ronne*).

For the treatment of final *e*, see under "General Rules" above.

2. DIPHTHONGS

Sound	Pronunciation	Example
ai, ay, ei, ay	between *ai* in "aisle" and *ay* in "day"	*saide, seid, day, preye*
au, aw	*ou* in "out"	*chaunge, utlawes*
eu, ew	*ew* in "few"	*newe*
oi, oy	*oy* in "joy"	*joye, point*
ou, ow	*ou* in "thought"	*thought, lowe*

Note that in words with *ou* and *ow* that in Modern English are sounded with the *ou* of "about," the combination indicates not the diphthong but the simple vowel long *u* (see "1. Simple Vowels" above).

3. CONSONANTS

In general, all consonants except *h* were always sounded in Middle English, including consonants that have become silent in Modern English such as the *g* in "gnaw," the *k* in "knight," the *l* in "folk," and the *w* in "write." In noninitial *gn*, however, the *g* was silent, as in Modern English "sign." Initial *h* was silent in short common English words and in words borrowed from French and may have been almost silent in all words. The combination *gh* as in "night" or "thought" was sounded like the *ch* of German *ich* or *nach*. Note that Middle English *gg* represents both the hard sound of "dagger" and the soft sound of "bridge."

III. Parts of Speech and Grammar

1. NOUNS

The plural and possessive of nouns end in *es*, formed by adding *s* or *es* to the singular: *knight, knightes; roote, rootes*; a final consonant is frequently doubled before *es: bed, beddes*. A common irregular plural is *eyen* (spelled variously, including *eyn, eghne, eyghen*—"eyes").

2. PRONOUNS

Where they appear, the chief differences from Modern English are as follows:

Modern English	Middle English
I	I, *Ich*
you (singular)	*thou* (subjective); *the(e)* (objective)
her	*hir(e)*, *her(e)*
its	*his*
you (plural)	*ye* (subjective); *you* (objective)
their	*her(e)*
them	*hem*

In formal speech, the second person plural is often used for the singular. The possessive adjectives *my* and *thy* take *n* before a word beginning with a vowel or *h*: *thyne oth, myn herte*.

3. ADJECTIVES

Adjectives ending in a consonant sometimes (though not consistently) add final *e* when they stand before the noun they modify and after another modifying word such as *the, this,* or *that* or nouns or pronouns in the possessive: *a good hors,* but *the (this, my, the kinges) goode hors.* They also may add *e* when standing before and modifying a plural noun, a noun in the vocative, or any proper noun.

Adjectives are compared by adding *er(e)* for the comparative, *est(e)* for the superlative. Sometimes the stem vowel is shortened or altered in the process: *sweete, swettere, swettest; long, lenger, lengest.*

Sometimes an adjective is used as a noun or "absolute adjective": *at Carlele shal that comly be crowned* (at Carlisle will that attractive man be crowned).

4. ADVERBS

Adverbs are formed from adjectives by adding *e, ly,* or *liche* (or *like*); the adjective *fair* thus yields *faire, fairly, fairliche.*

5. VERBS

Middle English verbs, like Modern English verbs, are either "weak" or "strong." Weak verbs form their preterites and past participles with a *t* or *d* suffix and preserve the same stem vowel throughout their systems, although it is sometimes shortened in the preterite and past participle: *love, loved; bend, bent; hear, heard; meet, met.* Strong verbs do not use the *t* or *d* suffix, but vary their stem vowel in the preterite and past participle: *take, took, taken; begin, began, begun; find, found, found.*

The inflectional endings are the same for Middle English strong verbs and weak verbs except in the preterite singular and the imperative singular. In the following paradigms, the weak verbs *loven* (to love) and *heeren* (to hear) and the strong verbs *taken* (to take) and *ginnen* (to begin) serve as models.

	Present Indicative	Preterite Indicative
I	*love, heere*	*loved(e), herde*
	take, ginne	*took, gan*
thou	*lovest, heerest*	*lovedest, herdest*
	takest, ginnest	*tooke, gonne*
he, she, it	*loveth, heereth*	*loved(e), herde*
	taketh, ginneth	*took, gan*
we, ye, they	*love(n) (th), heere(n) (th)*	*loved(e) (en), herde(n)*
	take(n) (th), ginne(n) (th)	*tooke(n), gonne(n)*

The present plural ending *eth* is southern, whereas the *e(n)* ending is Midland. In the north, *s* may appear as the ending of all persons of the present. In the weak preterite, when the ending *e* gave a verb three or more syllables, it was frequently dropped. Note that in certain strong verbs like *ginnen* there are two distinct stem vowels in the preterite; however, by the late fourteenth century one of these had begun to replace the other, and some texts occasionally use *gan* for all persons of the preterite.

	Present Subjunctive	Preterite Subjunctive
Singular	*love, heere*	*lovede, herde*
Plural	*take, ginne*	*tooke, gonne*
	love(n), heere(n)	*lovede(n), herde(n)*
	take(n), ginne(n)	*tooke(n), gonne(n)*

In verbs like *ginnen*, which have two stem vowels in the indicative preterite, it is the vowel of the plural and of the second person singular that is used for the preterite subjunctive.

The imperative singular of most weak verbs is *e: (thou) love*, but of some weak verbs and all strong verbs, the imperative singular is without termination: *(thou) heer, taak, gin*. The imperative plural of all verbs is either *e* or *eth: (ye) love(th), heere(th), take(th), ginne(th)*.

The infinitive of verbs is *e* or *en: love(n), heere(n), take(n), ginne(n)*.

The past participle of weak verbs is the same as the preterite without inflectional ending: *loved, herd*. In strong verbs the ending is either *e* or *en: take(n), gonne(n)*. The prefix *y-* or *i-* often appears on past participles: *y-founde, i-maked, y-sette*.

Abbreviations

The following are the principal abbreviations used in the footnotes and headnotes:

c. *circa*
cf. *compare*
esp. *especially*
ff. *and following* (or *folios* in descriptions of manuscripts)
l. *line*
ll. *lines*
lit. *literally*
ME *Middle English*
MS *manuscript*
MSS *manuscripts*
n. *(foot)note*
no. *number*
nos. *numbers*
p. *page*
pp. *pages*
r *recto*
v *verso*

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MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES