

The North-South divide in Middle English spelling conventions

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The Middle English period is generally acknowledged as the period during which much of the structure of the English language became (to a large degree) standardised. The period covers approximately 1150 to 1450, starting around a century after the Norman invasion and ending at a point when most official writing was being done in English, as opposed to Latin or Norman French. The period is characterised by enormous variation as the linguistic system settles on accepted norms in grammar, lexis and pronunciation/spelling.

The influence of Norman French spelling conventions, has long been assumed and is illustrated with examples such as the adoption of <qu> replacing the Old English <cw> in words like *queen* and the loss of characters such as thorn. The question of the geographic factors in this influence have been raised, specifically suggesting that the South of England was more susceptible to influence from Norman French than the North or West (Stenroos 2004, 2006) or that there was a North-East/South-West split (Benskin 1982). Gordon (2021) shows that Bristol appears to buck this trend for the loss of <þ>, suggesting that neither of these characterisations is fully supported.

This paper examines claims about the geographical distribution of the influence of Norman French by comparing the spread of features across the country in the documents in the MELD corpus (Stenroos et al. 2017). The features studied include <qu> replacing <cw>, <ch> as representing [ʃ] and <i> replacing <y>. Provisional findings show that the shift to <qu> was already complete by the start of the MELD corpus in 1399, but the other features show interesting patterns of use across the country. None of the features show a clear geographical division along North/South or East/West lines, indicating the need for further investigation.

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