

Malory's Middle English

Scholars refer to the English language from roughly the 11th–15th centuries as “Middle English.” Unlike Old English, which bears little resemblance to our modern English, Middle English seems readable, but looks as if it was written by a really bad speller. This is mostly because English spellings hadn’t really been standardized yet. It is only after the introduction of the printing press (near the end of this period, actually) that standard spellings and syntax begin to be “locked in”—the first English printer, William Caxton, struggled to standardize the language in the books he printed, as did his successor, Wynkyn de Worde. (Man! I *love* that name!) William Caxton printed Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, as well as another famous work you’ll study your Senior year, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

Here, for your enlightenment is the opening passage of “The Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake” without the help of Keith Baines’ retelling—raw Malory, in other words:

Soone after that kyng Arthur was come fro Rome in to Englonde thenne alle the knyghtes of the table round resorted vnto the kyng & made many Iustes & turnementes & some there were that were but kny3tes whiche encreaced so in armes and worship that they passed alle their felawes in prowesse and noble dedes and that was wel preued on many. But in especyal it was preued on syre Launcelot du lake for in al turnementys and Iustes and dedes of armes both for lyf and deth he passed al other kny3tes and at no tyme he was neuer ouercome but yf it were by treson or enchaument. So syr Launcelot encreaced soo merueyllously in worship and in honour therfor is he the fyrst kny3t that the Frensshe Book maketh mencyon of after kyng Arthur came fro Rome wherfore quene Gweneuer had hym in grete fauour aboue al other kny3tes. And in certayne he loued the quene ageyne aboue al other ladyes damoysels of his lyf. And for her he dyd many dedes of armes and saued her from the fyer thorou his noble chyualry. Thus syre Launcelot rested hym longe with play & game. And thenne he thought hym self to preue hym self in straunge auentures. Thenne he badde his neuewe syre Lyonel for to make hym redy for we two wylle seke aduentures. So they mounted on their horses armed at al ryghtes and rode in to a depe forest & soo in to a depe playne.

And thenne the weder was hote about noone and syre Launcelot had grete lust to slepe. Thenne syr Lyonel aspyed a grete appyl tree that stode by an hedge & said broder yonder is a fayre shadowe there maye we reste vs on oure horses. Hit is wel saide faire broder said syr Launcelot for this viij yere I was not so slepy as I am now. And so they there alyghted & tayed their horses vnto sondry trees and so syr Launcelot layd hym doune vnder an appyl tree and his helme he layd vnder his hede. And syre Lyonel waked whyle he slepte...

Pretty cool, huh? (Oh yes, it is—don’t argue.) Well, now it’s your chance to play Keith Baines. Here’s another piece of a tale from Malory’s book. On a separate sheet of paper, take a crack at writing a good Modern English translation. Don’t add details or anything, just see if you can bring it safely across the gap from Middle English, the same way Keith Baines “retold” Malory’s “Tale of Sir Launcelot.” You’ll need to update the language (to standard written English, please, nothing wild), and add appropriate punctuation. In short, re-tell the tale in well-written, plain Modern English.

Here’s your piece, from “The Tale of Sir Gareth.” Gareth, not yet a knight of the Round Table, is working at Arthur’s court in a disguise of sorts—he working in the kitchen under the name “Beaumains” (French for “pretty hands”!) A noblewoman shows up, asking for Arthur to lend her some help against a mysterious “Red Knight of the Red Launds.” Beaumains volunteers for the job, and Arthur, who promised to grant him two requests,

agrees to send him. The noblewoman is not happy to have been given a "kitchen knave" for such an important quest, and verbally abuses poor Gareth for the rest of the story. In this excerpt, Gareth goes up against the Green Knight:

Thus as they rode to gyders they sawe a knyght come dryuend by them al in grene bothe his hors & his harneis ²And whanne he came nyghe the damoyssel he asked her is that my broder the black Kny³te that ye haue brought with yow ³Nay nay she sayd this vnhappy kechen knaue hath slayne your broder thorou vnhappy nesse ⁴Allas sayd the grene knyghte that is grete pyte that soo noble a knyghte as he was shold soo vnhappyly be slayne and namely of a knaues hand as ye say that he is a traytour ⁵sayd the grene knyghte thou shalt dye for sleynge of my broder he was a ful noble knyghte and his name was syr Pereard ⁶I defye the said Beaumayns for I lete the wete I slewe hym knyghtely and not shamefully ⁷There with al the grene knyghte rode vnto an horne that was grene and hit henge vpon a thorne and there he blewe thre dedely motys and there came two damoyssels and armed hym lyghtely ⁸And thenne he took a grete hors and a grene shelde and a grene spere ⁹And thenne they ranne to gyders with al their myghtes and brake their speres vnto their handes ¹⁰And thenne they drewe their swerdes and gaf many sadde strokes and either of them wounded other ful yll ¹¹And at the last at an ouerthwart Beaumayns with his hors strake the grene knyghtes hors vpon the syde that he felle to the erthe ¹²And thenne the grene knyghte auoyded his hors lightly and dressid hym vpon foote ¹³That sawe Beaumayns and there with al he alighte and they rashed to gyders lyke two myghty kempys a longe whyle and sore they bledde bothe ¹⁴With that cam the damoyssel and said my lord the grene knyghte why for shame stande ye soo longe fyghtyng with the kechyn knaue ¹⁵Allas it is shame that euer ye were made knyghte to see suche a ladde to matche suche a knyghte as the wede ouer grewe the corne ¹⁶There with the grene knyght was ashamed and there with al he gaf a grete stroke of myghte & clafe his shelde thorou ¹⁷Whan Beaumayns sawe his shelde clouen a sonder he was a lytel ashamed of that stroke and of her langage ¹⁸And thenne he gaf hym suche a buffet vpon the helme that he felle on his knees and soo sodenly Beaumayns pulled hym vpon the ground grouelynge ¹⁹And thenne the grene knyghte cryed hym mercy and yelded hym vnto syre Beaumayns and prayd hym to slee hym not ²⁰Al is in vayn said Beaumayns for thou shalt dye but yf this damoyssel that came with me praye me to saue thy lyf and ther with al he vnaced his helme lyke as he wold slee hym ²¹Fy vpon the false kechen page I wyll neuer pray the to saue his lyf for I will neuer be soo moche in thy daunger ²²Thenne shalle he deye sayde Beaumayns ²³Not soo hardy thou bawdy knaue sayd the damoyssel that thou slee hym ²⁴Allas sayd the grene knyghte suffre me not to dye for a fayre word may saue me ²⁵Fayr kny³t said the grene knyghte saue my lyf & I wyl foryeue the the dethe of my broder and for euer to become thy man and xxx knyghtes that hold of me for euer shal doo you seruyse ²⁶In the deuyls name sayd the damoyssel that suche a bawdy kechen knaue shold haue the and thyrty knyghtes seruyse ²⁷Syr knyght said Beaumayns alle this auaylleth the not but yf my damoyssel speke with me for thy lyf ²⁸And therwith al he made a semblaunt to slee hym ²⁹Lete be sayd the damoyssel thou bawdy knaue slee hym not for and thou do thou shalt repente it ³⁰Damoyssel said Beaumayns your charge is to me a pleasyr and at your commaundement his lyf shal be saued & els not ³¹Thenne he said sir Knyghte with the grene armes I releace the quyte at this damoyssels request for I wylle not make her wrothe I wille fulfille al that she chargeth me ³²And thenne the grene knyghte kneled doune and dyd hym homage with his swerd ³³Thenne said the damoisel me repenteth grene knyghte of your dommage and of youre broders dethe the black knyghte for of your helpe I had grete myster for I drede me sore to passe this forest ³⁴Nay drede you not sayd the grene knyghte for ye shal lodge with me this nyghte and to morne I shalle helpe you thorou this forest...