Some problems in the *Middle English Dictionary*[*]

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The *Middle English Dictionary* is now approaching completion. It is indispensable especially for readers of medieval English works and its value is beyond calculation. The accuracy of the text readings, the minute descriptions of word meanings and the thoroughness and perspicacity to treat enormous quotations strike us with admiration. However, when reading medieval English romances I have come across some questionable points, about which I would like to elucidate in this paper from the viewpoint of a user of the *MED*.

The Comparisons of the *OED* and the *MED*

First, I would like to make some comparisons between the *OED* and the *MED* concerning their definitions of word meanings. They bring into relief how reliable dictionaries are and how dictionaries generally work upon their users.

Grei

In medieval English romances *eyen stepe and gray* is quite a common expression to describe a beautiful lady. The adjective *stepe* can describe two aspects of eyes : it means either "prominent," "large" or "brilliant," "gleaming." The following instance is cited by both the *OED* and the *MED* under **Steep** and **stepe** respectively.

> *KTars* 15 Þe meiden was schast & bliþe of chere,
>
> Wiþ rode red so blosme on brere,
>
> & *eyȝen stepe & gray*;

However, the *OED* interprets the adjective *stepe* as "brilliant," on the other hand the *MED* as "large" or "prominent." These differences of interpretation of the adjective *stepe* are caused by the different treatment of each dictionary about the adjective *gray*. The *OED* defines *grey* as " (of eyes) Having a grey iris." It follows that the sense of *stepe* can be "brilliant." On the other hand the *MED* defines *grei* as " (of eyes) bright, gleaming (of indeterminate color)," It justly follows that the sense of *stepe* cannot be "brilliant" but must be "large," "prominent."

In medieval romances *gray* referring to the color of eyes is often compared with glass or crystal.

> *Toulouse* 343 Hur eyen were *gray as any glas* ;

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This expression shows that *gray* here does not refer to a gray color but means "gleaming" or "shining." This holds good not only for *gray* but also for *brown*. *Browne* in the following instances does not mean brown in color but "shining" or "bright," as the *MED*'s definition under **broun** 5 shows:

> *Octavian* 1024 Wyth sperys longe and schyldys *browne*;
>
> *Toulouse* 69 Wyth spere and schylde *browne*.
>
> *MED* **broun** n.5. Of steel, weapons, armor, glass, etc.: shining,
>
> polished, bright

This argument being accepted, the writer certainly believes that the sense of *browne* in *here eyn were browne* of the following instance is "shining," not "brown," although Bliss[1] glosses it as "brown:"

> *Launfal* 242 Hare faces were whyt as snow on downe;
>
> Har rode was red, here eyn were *browne*:
>
> I sawe neuir non swyche!

Although the *MED* is particular about the sense of *grei eie*, it neglects *broun eie* in this sense. It just mentions personal names such as John Bruneye and defines *broun eie* as "brown eyed" under **broun** n.2 (b). It may be that etc. in the definition under **broun** n.5. includes *eyes*.

Round

In the case of *round* as well, the *OED* gives nothing but the denotative meaning of *round* as follows:

> *OED* **Round** a. 4. Having all parts of the circumference
>
> equidistant from the centre;.....

This definition leaves us puzzled when facing *rownnde* in the following instance:

> *Amadace*143 'Sir, a marchand of this cité,
>
> Hade riche rentus to rere.
>
> And eviryche yere thre hundrythe pownde
>
> Of redy monay and of *rownnde*,

The *MED* quotes the instance above under **round(e** adj.6. (a) and gives the connotative meaning which the adjective *round* carries when it goes with money as follows:

> *MED* **round(e** adj.6. Of money: good, current [? cp.3 (a) good
>
> because round, not worn or clipped]

This definition may be supported by the following instances:

> *KEd & S* 586 Thouȝ he shuld gif of his catell,
>
> I shalle haue myne, euery dell,
>
> Off penys *holl and rownde*.
>
> *Octavian* 728 The man hym lovyd for thyrty pownde,
>
> Eche peny *hole and sownde*;

Holl and rownde in *KEd & S* 586 runs parallel with *hole and sownde* in *Octavian* 728, which denotes that *rownde* here has a similar meaning to *sownde*.

Crie

Failure in definition by a dictionary sometimes leads the reader to a wrong interpretation. Heffernan[2] glosses *crye* in *Florence* 174 as "shouting," "clamor," "proclamation:"

> *Florence* 174 And euyr þe formast speryd þe wayes
>
> Vnto þe emperowrs paleys,
>
> Full ryall was that *crye*;

However, shouting here is a bizarre behavior. Moreover, it is not clear whether the shouting is of the 40 messengers sent by the emperor Sir Garcy or of the citizens of Rome. The *MED* gives "A group of soldiers, company, troop, host, army" as one of the senses of *crye* under **crie** n. 6, which suits the context here well. Thus "the company was very magnificent." The counterpart of this definition in the *OED* is as follows:

> *OED* **Cry** 13. A pack of hounds (the first instance dated 1590)
>
> †b.*contemptuously* a pack (of people) (the first
>
> instance dated 1602)

This information given by the *OED* will make it almost impossible to read *crye* here in the sense of "company" since the statement means that the word basically refers to hounds.

Kene

In the case of *kene* the *OED* causes a similar difficulty in *Havelok* 1832.

> *Havelok* 1832 For he was ded on lesse hwile
>
> Þan men mouthe renne a mile.
>
> Alle þe oþere weren ful *kene*;
>
> A red þei taken hem bitwene
>
> Þat he sholde[n] him bihalue,
>
> And brisen so þat wit no salue
>
> Ne sholde him helen leche non.

At the same evening when Havelok was invited to dinner by Ubbe, a justice, he was attacked by 61 vagabonds. Havelok took the door-bar and assailed the enemy one after another. The vagabonds, finding themselves in an unfavorable turn of the situation, took counsel amongst themselves and tried to beat him at the same time. Eventually they threw stones at him from a distance ; that is to say, these vagabonds were neither bold nor brave but mean and unmanly. Nevertheless, Skeat & Sisam[3], Sands[4], Schmidt[5], Garbáty[6] and Smithers[7] interpret *kene* here as "brave," "tough," "bold," "tough," and "bold" respectively. It may be because they could not find any suitable sense except for "bold" or "brave" in the definitions in the *OED* or they may all have interpreted this passage as irony. However, it is very much questionable whether irony is intended here. The *MED* defines the sense of *kene* here as "angry," "resentful" and quotes this instance under **kene** 2. (b), which is suitable in this context.

Strangely enough, the *OED* quotes the following instance of *Horn* 164 and defines *kene* as "brave," "bold," "valiant," "daring" under **Keen** *a. (adv.)*†2.a. Perhaps influenced by the *OED*, Dunn & Byrnes[8] also glosses it as "bold."

> *Horn* 164 "Whannes beo ȝe, faire gumes,
>
> Þat her to londe beoþ icume,

Alle þrottene,

Of *bodie* swiþe *kene*?

There is no doubt that *kene* here is an adjective modifying *bodi* and *bodi* means not the whole group of the youths but the physique of the youths as the *MED*'s quotation of this instance under **bodi** n.1. (a) shows. This interpretation is supported by Allen[9], Fellows[10] and Garbáty[11] who gloss *kene* here as "stalwart," "very strong" and "very hardy" respectively. However, the *MED* does not record the collocation of *kene bodi* and fails to register the sense "stalwart," "strong," or "hardy" as one of the meanings of *kene*.

Word Meanings and Contextual Meanings

The *MED*'s readings of texts is exceedingly accurate and the analysis of word meanings is alarmingly elaborate. However, it seems that the elaboration of word meaning analysis sometimes results in producing contextual meanings.

Ibringen

The *MED* quotes *Amis* 538 and defines *ibringen hard* as "?to oppose (the heart)" under **ibringen** v.3. (d).

Amis 538 Ac hir hert was so *hard ibrou3t*,

On loue-longing was al hir þou3t,

Leach[12] says, 'The line is difficult, as the variant readings show. Stoffel says that *so hard ibrou3t* suggests hard-bestead.' However, to state my conclusion first, it may be that *on hym* is understood here for some reasons. One of the pieces of evidence to support this assumption is that this passage related by the narrator is echoed by Belisaunt herself later as follows :

Amis 571 "Sir kni3t, *on þe mine hert is brou3t*,

þe to loue is al mi þou3t

Here we have *on þe*. As for the adverb *so hard*, we can detect the usage in the following similar expression.

Amis 581 Mine hert *so hard is on þe li3t*,

Mi ioie is al forlorn ;

We have further similar expressions:

Degaré 828 Þat al his herte and his þout

Hire to loue *was ibrowt.*

Emaré 224 That all hys hert and all hys þow3th

Her to loue *was ybrowght ;*

It can safely be said that the expression in *Amis* 538 comes into being from these kinds of expressions. The problem is whether *ibringen hard* is qualified sufficiently as an independent idiom. The question mark attached to the definition in the *MED* presumably denotes the difficulty of this judgement. However, since *ibringen hard* is a hapax legomenon, and there is no evidence to show that *hard ibrou3t* is independent enough to be recognized as an idiom, it does seem likely that the sense comes from the context.

Dighten

The *MED* quotes the following instance under **dighten** 1a.(g) "to cultivate (land, soil, grain, vines)."

> *Amadace* 689 For we myghte noghte this faurtenyghte
>
> Owre rich londus dele and *dighte*,
>
> Thay liun so wide-quare.

Sir Amadace is helped out of difficulty by a knight from the other world on the condition that he should divide between him and the knight what he will succeed in obtaining. Now the knight has visited Sir Amadace to demand the fulfillment of his pledge. Sir Amadace is willing to deliver up half of his land. In this context "to divide and prepare his lands" means "to divide the land and prepare it for delivering." However, according to the *MED*'s definition it would mean "to divide the land and prepare it for seeding." *Dighten* here does not involve the sense "to cultivate (the land)." Therefore, *Amadace* 689 is wrongly registered under **dighten** 1a.(g).

Lasten

The *MED* defines *last* in the following instance as "to be able (to do sth)" under **lasten** 6.(c) and interprets *draw* in line 192 as "to draw (an arrow) on the bowstring," "shoot (an arrow);" "draw (a bow)" under **drauen** 1b.(b):

> *KEd & S* 191 Þer is no bow þat shall *laste*
>
> To *draw* to my slynges caste,

In the case of *drawen*, its definition denotes that the sense of *drauen* ranges from "to draw an arrow or a bow" to "to shoot (an arrow)." However, *laste* in line 191 retains its original sense. Whether "to be able (to do sth)" which the *MED* offers as the sense of *lasten* here is entitled to be treated as an independent item is questionable. Certainly it is difficult to make a decision when the sense of a word has become sufficiently detached from its contextual meaning to be recognized in a lexical sense. However, since the infinitive phrase *to draw to my slynges caste* seems to remain its adverbial function, we can conclude that the sense of "to be able" comes from the context. This semantic subdivision might be useful in order to follow the tread of the process of the semantic change of this word only when it shows further semantic development.

Questionable Points in the *MED*

Fre presoun

The *MED* sometimes does not give as much information as would be expected. *Athelston* 424 presents a difficulty.

> *Athelston* 424 Gyltles men 3iff þay be
>
> Þat are in my *presoun ffree*
>
> Forcursyd þere to 3elle—
>
> Off þe gylt and þay be clene—
>
> Leue it moot on hem be sene
>
> Þat garte hem þere to dwelle.

King Athelston is in full confidence with a slanderer, commits the innocent Egeland family into the prison,

and refuses the Queen's intercession. Under these circumstances, the King comes to church to pray to God for justice. The above passage is a part of his supplication.

French & Hale[13] notes that "'free prisoun' was custody without confinement." However, we must dismiss this interpretation since we were told that Sir Egeland was fettered fast in line 242. Sands[14] suggests "re-doutable" and Schmidt[15] glosses it as "strong." Certainly these readings seem to be consistent contextually but the problem is that the adjective *fre* does not have such a sense. Schmidt[16] says in his notes as follows:

> *MED* gives the alternatives of 'custody without torture' or 'prison under the jurisdiction of an
> incorporated city'...but lacks points. It may be that we have an extension of the sense 'noble'
> to 'great,' 'powerful'.....It is conceivable that Athelston's *fre*(= noble) really applies to himself
> and is awkwardly transferred to the prison, producing the paradoxical reading.

He has failed to consult the *MED* here. The *MED* cited this instance under **fre** adj. 2a. (c).

> *MED* **fre** adj. 2a. (c) of things ; precious, excellent ; of conditions,
> manners, habits, actions : befitting a freeman, noble.

Unfortunately MED's definition is so vague that it is not much of any assistance here as in the case of *to lasten* or *to ibringen hard*. Neither "precious" nor "excellent" seems to make any sense.

We should not fail to notice that this passage is the King's own remarks which are directed to God in his prayer. Therefore, this passage should be read not from the narrator's point of view but from the King's. Furthermore, it seems likely that the King refers to prison not as a building but as an institute. Then, his own prison cannot be redoutable. On the contrary it should be a fortress to fight against evil and for jus-tice. If so, *fre* here means something like "noble ;" "clean," "free from taint."

Speren

Speryd in *Florence* 172 presents another difficulty. The *MED* quotes *Florence* 172 under **speren** 6. and *Florence* 149 under **spiren** v(1)1.

> *Florence* 172 Lordys and ladyes of grete astate,
> And odur many, well Y wate,
> At wyndows owt can lye.
> And euyr þe formast *speryd* þe wayes
> Vnto þe emperowrs paleys,
> Full ryall was that crye ;
> *MED* **speren** 6. (l.172) to block (a path, bodily channel, etc),
> also fig ; ? also block the way [quot.?a 1450 1ˢᵗ.]

> *Florence* 149 They passed þorow Pole and Chawmpayn,
> Euyr *sperying* ther gatys gayne
> Vnto the cyte of Rome.
> *MED* **spiren** v (1)1. (b) (l.149) to ask (sth., a question)....
> ~**gate** (**wei**), ask the way.

The problem is what makes the *MED* read these two quotations differently in spite of the fact that they are

almost parallel constructions. Presumably the editors have interpreted *speryd þe wayes* in *Florence* 172 to mean "blocked the way" based on the assumption that 40 messengers from Constantinople who proceeded to Rome by asking the way to the City of Rome don't have to ask the way to the Palace once they enter the City. That may or may not be right. In any case it is not supported by any evidence in this passage. The writer would prefer to interpret *speryd* as "asked" partly because lines 172-173 in *Florence* run parallel with lines 149-150 in *Florence* and partly because all the other *spirens* which occur in this text mean "to ask" [spering 1.149, spere 1.293, speryd 1.448, spere 1.1556, spyr 1.1740, spyr 1.1953].

Incidentally C, F, Heffernan[17] glosses *speryd* in line 172 as "shut up" and *spering* in line 149 as "closing," that is to say, she interprets both verbs *speren* as meaning "to block." However, was it a customary practice to block the way when as many as forty messengers went through cities?

Red Gold

The phrase *red gold* is often encountered in medieval romances. The *OED* defines *red* in this phrase as a conventional (chiefly poet) epithet of gold under **Red** *a.* and *sb.* 3. while under **Gold** 5 it defines *red gold* as "gold alloyed with copper" which is modern technical usage based on an instance dated 1839.

The *MED* defines *red gold* in this phrase as "Of the metal gold, gold coins, gold leaf: pure [as shown through becoming red when heated;...] ~**gold**, **gold**~, pure or reddish gold" under **red** adj.1.f. (a) while under **gold** n.1. (c) it defines *red gold* as "gold with a small alloy of copper to enhance its color."

The *OED* simply says that *red* is an epithet but gives no information concerning the red color. The *MED* tells us what *red gold* means and why it is called *red*. By doing so the *MED* recognizes two meanings in *red gold*. Judging from the quotations given in the *MED*, *red gold* in the sense of "alloyed gold" is used for spurs, cups, doors, banner etc. while *red gold* in the sense of "pure gold" is used for gold itself, gold coins, crown etc. However, it is not that easy to make this distinction. Actually, Schmidt[18] interprets *gold red* in *Orfeo* 150 as "gold alloyed with copper which had a reddish hue," while the *MED* quotes the same instance as above under **red** adj.1.f. (a) to mean "pure gold:"

> *Orfeo* 150 Þe King hadde a croun on hed :
>
> It nas of siluer no of *gold red*,
>
> Ac it was of a precious ston :

Presumably we are entitled to ask on what authority the *MED* recognizes these almost opposite meanings, that is, pure gold and alloyed gold. My investigations into the medieval English romances have not revealed any instances where the sense of "pure gold" does violence to the logic and sense of the narratives.

Serie

Serie is a hapax legomenon occurring only in *Horn* 1385.

> *Horn* 1385 He com to his moder halle
>
> In a roche walle.
>
> Corn he let *serie*,
>
> And makede feste merie ;

Horn's native land is dispossessed by heathen Saracens, and his mother, the Queen, shelters herself into a

rock cave to retain her faith as a Christian. After some adventures, Horn regains his native land and searches for his mother. Then, according to the *MED*, which defines *serien* as "to allot or distribute (sth)," he delivers grain to the natives to save them from starvation. Afterwards, he makes a merry feast. However, it seems to be a bit bizzare.

Lumby says the sense is obscure. Hall[19] emends *serie* to *ferie* which means "to transport, carry, convey..." It follows that Horn lets them carry grain into the cave in order to make a merry feast. This interpretation is followed by French & Hale,[20] Sands[21] and Garbáty.[22] However, it is still strange to bring some grain for a feast and to have a feast in a rock cave.

Allen[23] makes a conjecture based upon the other two manuscripts, MS Laud Misc. and MS Harley and emends *corn* to *croun* and *serie* to *werie*, meaning Horn lets his mother wear the crown. Allen's emendation is the most plausible among those suggested so far. How can the *MED* be justified when the text may be corrupted and there is no further evidence available to support the definition?

Problematical Points in the *MED*

Late

Late in *Havelok* 2611 presents the similar difficulty.

> *Havelok* 2611 Þo mouthe men se þe brinies brihte
>
> On backes keste, and *late* rithe,
>
> Þe helmes heye on heued sette ;

Skeat & Sisam,[24] Sands[25] and Garbáty[26] gloss *late rithe* as "to put, set right, to straighten." The *MED* cites this instance under **leten** v.7b.(c) and defines it as follows :

> *MED* **leten** v.7b.(c) **~right**, put on or set (sth.) to rights,
>
> arrange (sth.) properly ;

However, "to set the brinies straight" after casting them on their backs seems an indifferent action to describe here. Smithers[27] says "*late* is clearly a corruption of *lace* "lace up" ; ....The emendation is set beyond doubt by two passages in *King Horn*, which (like this one) refer briefly to the process of arming before battle, and in both of which (as in this one) the verb *lace* in the sense 'lace up' is applied to corslets:"

> *Horn* 717 Horn sadelede his stede,
>
> And his armes he gan sprede :
>
> His brunie he gan *lace*
>
> So he scholde into place.
>
> *Horn* 842 Horn his brunie gan on caste,
>
> And *lacede* hit wel faste,

Smither's emendation and his argument is very much persuasive. Certainly corruptions of manuscripts are among the problematic areas which require incessant emendations of dictionaries.

Hende

The *MED* cited *Triam* 1206 under **hend(e** adj.1.(a) and defines *hende* here as follows :

> *Triam* 1206 Ayther were armed on a stede,
>
>> Of Tryamowre was grete drede,
>>
>> Ther was non so *hynde in halle*;
>>
>> Moradas was so styff in stowre,
>>
>> Ther myght no man hys dyntys dewre,

> *MED* **hend(e** adj. 1. (a) Having the approved courtly or knightly
>
>> qualities, noble, courtly, well-bred, refined, sportsmanlike;

Schmidt[28] and Fellows[29] also gives it the sense "kind," "gracious." It seems that the *MED* and these scholars interpret *hende in hall* as a formulaic expression. However, the interpretation does not fit this context. Tryamoure and Moradas armed on the horses are on the point of rushing at each other in the field of battle. Tryamoure was much dreadful as indicated in line 1205. Therefore, he must be valiant instead of gracious in the hall. Otherwise, only Moradas would be bold and valiant in combat. *Hende* here can mean "valiant" in combat as can be seen in the following passage:

> *Horn* 1302 Hi founde vnder schelde
>
>> A kniȝt *hende in felde.*

And *hall* in *hynde in hall* can be "company assembled in a hall" as the *MED* shows under **hal(le** n.3 (a). Thus, it follows that there was no one so valiant amongst the company assembled in the hall as Tryamoure.

Bordis ende

The *MED* quotes the following instance under **biginnen** v.4 (c), **bord** n.4b (a), and **ende** n.15 (c) respectively .

> *KEd&S* 868 When tablys were layd and cloþes sprad,
>
>> Þe scheperde into þe hall was lad
>>
>> To *begynne* a *bordis ende.*

> *MED* **biginnen** v. 4. (c) to start the row of quests at table, i.e.
>
>> sit in the place of honor at the right of the host.

> **bord** n.4b. (a) **bord(es) ende**, the foot of the table
>
>> (as opposed to the head)

> **ende** n. 15. (c) the foot (of the table)

The definition under **biginnen** means that the shepherd sits at the head of the table while those under **bord** and **ende** mean that he takes a lower seat. It seems that the *MED* gives the same instance a different interpretation. An examination of this context clearly shows that the shepherd should sit at the head of the table. The reason this happens may be that the *MED* reads the text as *biginne bord* for the definition of *biginnen* and reads as *bordis ende*, ignoring *biginne*, for the definitions of *bord* and *ende*. However, *ende* does not necessarily mean "terminal." *The foremost ende* in the following instance means the head person of the ring of the dance.

> *Launfal* 661 Þe Quene yede to *þe formeste ende,*

The ende in the following instance means the head of the table as the next line *In al þe feirest seete* shows:

> *Floris* 390 Þe childe he sette next *þe ende*

In al þe feirest seete.

Therefore the *bordis ende* in *KEd & S* 868 means the top end of the table. *Biginne borde* would be adequate here without *ende*, which occurs, no doubt, for the requirement of rhyming.

Bihinde

Bihinde in *Amis* 2190 is ambiguous whether whatever Amis asks for is served immediately or is not wanting at all.

> *Amis* 2190 No wold þai nick him wiþ no nay,
>
> What so euer he asked niȝt or day,
>
> It nas neuer *bihinde*;
>
> Of euerich mete & eueri drink
>
> Þai had hem-selue, wiþ-outen lesing,
>
> Þai were him boþe ful minde.

Unfortunately there is no clue in this passage by which we can judge the meaning of *bihinde*. Françoise[30] glosses it as "slow in coming," "late." Rickert[31] translates this sentence as "He lacked nothing of the meat and drink." However, this does not justify the *MED* in quoting the same instance both under **bihind(en** adv. & pred. adj.2. (b) and under 4a. (c).

> *MED* **bihinde(n** adv. & pred. adj. 2. (b) **ben~**, be behind time,
>
> be delayed, tardy, or late;
>
> **ben bihinde**, 4a. (c) of things: to be inferior or neglected;
>
> fall short, be wanting.

Store

Store in *Florence* 1657 presents a difficulty. A knight who wooed Florence persistently was thwarted in his wicked intention and held a grudge against her. He acted out a vicious plan to entrap Florence. He killed Betres, the daughter of his master, with a knife and put the knife with blood in Florence's hand. The whole family rushed to the bedroom to face this disastrous scene. Amid this chaotic situation Florence wakes up.

> *Florence* 1657 Knyghtys and ladyes came belyfe,
>
> Wondur sore wepeande:
>
> Gentyll wemen sore dud wepe,
>
> And euyr can feyre Florence slepe,
>
> That was so feyre to fande.
>
> Sche glyste vp wyth þe hedeows *store*,
>
> A sorowfull wakenyng had sche þore,
>
> Soche anodur was neuyr in lande.

The *MED* quotes this instance under **store** n. (1) 3. (a).

> *MED* **store** n. (1) 3. (a) A stored or saved amount of provisions,
>
> possessions etc. a store of foodstuffs; a supply of something;

....a hoard of money; pl. necessary supplies of wood.

Since Florence and Betres were in the bedroom, it does not make sense that she woke up surrounded with provisions, a hoard of money or supplies of wood. Something wrong may have happened dealing with the quotation, because *store* in the sense of "commotion" is quite rare in Middle English. The *OED* rightly interprets this *store* here as "Tumult, uproar, commotion, fuss" under **Stour** 4. Yet the reason that the *OED* classifies *store* in this instance into **Stour** is doubtful. Preferably it may be more rational to interpret *store* as a variant of *stir* in the sense of "commotion, disturbance, tumult, general excitement; fuss," belonging to **Stir** *sb.* 3 in the *OED*.

Grese

Wedding *GR* 48 had been a puzzling line for a long time:

Wedding *GR* 48 Doun the dere tumbli̇d so deron,

And felle into a great brake of feron ;

The king followid fulle faste.

Anon the king bothe ferce and felle

Was withe the dere and did him serve welle.

And after *the grasse he taste.*

King Arthur shot a hart and put an end to the fallen deer. What follows next? Sumner glosses *grasse* as "grass" and *taste* as "tasted." Her definitions produce a queer sense that the dead deer tasted the grass. In order to find some way out of this incongruity, Garbáty[32] tries to read a similar meaning here to the idiomatic phrase *he bit the dust* (ie. died) but there is nothing to justify this comparison. Sands[33] says as follows :

> A puzzling line, the difficulty being the referent of *he* (either the deer or Arthur) and the exact meaning of *taste* 'touch.' Perhaps "And afterwards he [the deer] touched the grass" [that is, died] is better than "And afterwards he [Arthur] touched the grass" [perhaps to wipe the deer's blood from his hands].

Garbáty and Sands do not give a solution to the contradiction that the dead deer must die again. In 1982 Dannenbaum[34] glosses *grasse* not as "grass" but as "grease," that is, "fat" and *taste* as "examined" and concludes that King Arthur pursues the deer, kills it and examines the fatness of his deer. The reasons that they had so much difficulty in perceiving that *grasse* is a variant of *grease* may come from the high ambiguity in this passage, that is, whether *he* refers to the deer or Arthur, and *taste* means "tasted" or "touched" and the close association of deer with grass stands as a barrier to the resolution of this question. We are in need of the cultural background of conventional hunting practice involving the examination of the fatness of a killed deer. The *MED* defines *tasten* as "to touch, examine, palpate, feel someone's pulse, probe (a wound)." The addition of "to examine the fatness of game" would be of great help to the users of the dictionary. Incidentally D. G. Hartwell[35] interpreted *the gresse he taste* as "he tested the grease" in 1973.

The *OED* and the *MED* define *grese* as "short for hart or deer of grease" under **Grease** *sb.*†1.†c. and "game animal, deer" under **gres(e** n. 2. (d) respectively, quoting *Ipomydon* 370:

Ipomydon 370 Tomorrow, Loke ye be all redy dight..

In the forest to take my *grese.*

Certainly *Wedding GR* 48 is a valuable example that gives an explanation to the semantic evolution of this word from "grease" to "deer."

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

*　This is a revised version of a paper read at the 70th General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan held at Kyoto University on May 23, 1998.

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2　Heffernan, C. F. (1976) *Le Bone Florence of Rome,* Manchester.

3　Skeat, W. W. (1915) *The Lay of Havelok the Dane,* 2nd ed, rev. by K. Sisam, Oxford.

4　Sands, D. B. (1966) *Middle English Verse Romances,* New York. p. 100.

5　Schmidt, A. V. C. and N. Jacobs (1980) *Medieval English Romances,* London, Part I. p. 88.

6　Garbáty, Th. J. (1984) *Medieval English Literature,* Toronto. p. 224.

7　Smithers, G.V. (1987) *Havelok,* Oxford.

8　Dunn, C.W. and E.T. Byrnes (1973) *Middle English Literature,* New York. p. 118.

9　Allen, R. (1984) *King Horn,* New York & London.

10　Fellows, J. (1993) *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance,* London. p. 5.

11　Garbáty, Th. J. (1984) *Medieval English Literature,* Toronto. p.147.

12　Leach, M. (1937) *Amis and Amiloun,* EETS, OS 203, Oxford.

13　French, W. H. and C. B. Hale (1930) *Middle English Metrical Romances,* New York. p. 193.

14　Sands, D. B. (1966) *Middle English Verse Romances,* New York. p. 143.

15　Schmidt, A. V. C. and N. Jacobs (1980) *Medieval English Romances,* London, Part I . p. 137.

16　Schmidt, A. V. C. and N. Jacobs (1980) ibid. p. 193.

17　Heffernan, C. F. (1976) *Le Bone Florence of Rome,* Manchester.

18　Schmidt, A. V. C. and N. Jacobs (1980) *Medieval English Romances,* London, Part I .p. 200.

19　Hall, J. (1901) *King Horn,* Oxford.

20　French, W. H. and C. B. Hale (1930) *Middle English Metrical Romances,* New York. p. 66.

21　Sands, D. B. (1966) *Middle English Verse Romances,* New York. p. 51.

22　Garbáty, Th. J. (1984) *Medieval English Literature,* Toronto. p. 176.

23　Allen, R. (1984) *King Horn,* New York & London. p. 353.

24　Skeat, W. W. (1915) *The Lay of Havelok the Dane,* 2nd ed, rev. by K. Sisam, Oxford.

25　Sands, D. B. (1966) *Middle English Verse Romances,* New York. p. 120.

26　Garbáty, Th. J. (1984) *Medieval English Literature,* Toronto. p. 244.

27　Smithers, G. V. (1981) 'Four notes on *Hauelok',* *So many people languages and tongues,* Benskin and Samuels [538] pp. 191-209.

28　Schmidt, A. J. E. (1937) *Syr Tryamowre,* Utrecht.

29　Fellows, J. (1993) *Of Love and Chivalry : An Anthology of Middle English Romance,* London. p. 182.

30　Françoise, L. S., (1993) *Amys and Amylion,* University of Exeter.

31 Rickert, E. (1908) *Early English Romances in Verse Done into Modern English : Romaces of Friendship*, New York. p. 42.

32 Garbáty, Th. J. (1984) *Medieval English Literature*, Toronto. p. 420.

33 Sands, D. B. (1966) *Middle English Verse Romances*, New York. p. 327.

34 Dannenbaum, Susan (1982) 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, Line 48', *Explicator,* 40.3, pp. 3-4.

35 Hartwell, D. G. (1973) *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, Columbia University. Ph. D. dissertation. p. 121.