

**A CONCISE DICTIONARY
OF MIDDLE ENGLISH
FROM A. D. 1150 TO
1580. [OXFORD-1888]**

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MAYHEW AND SKEAT

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CONCISE DICTIONARY
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FROM A.D. 1150 TO 1580

BY THE
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"THESE our Ancient Words here set down, I trust will for this time satisfie
the Reader."—R. VERSTEGAN, *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, ch. vii (at the end)

"Authentic words be given, or none!"

WORDSWORTH, *Lines on Macpherson's Ossian*

Oxford
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS
M DCCC LXXXVIII

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PREFACE.

(BY PROFESSOR SKEAT.)

THE present work is intended to meet, in some measure, the requirements of those who wish to make some study of Middle-English, and who find a difficulty in obtaining such assistance as will enable them to find out the meanings and etymologies of the words most essential to their purpose.

The best Middle-English Dictionary, that by Dr. Mätzner of Berlin, has only reached the end of the letter H; and it is probable that it will not be completed for many years. The only Middle-English Dictionary that has been carried on to the end of the alphabet is that by the late Dr. Stratmann, of Krefeld. This is a valuable work, and is indispensable for the more advanced student. However, the present work will still supply a deficiency, as it differs from Stratmann's Dictionary in many particulars. We have chosen as our Main Words, where possible, the most typical of the forms or spellings of the period of Chaucer and Piers Plowman; in Stratmann, on the other hand, the form chosen as Main Word is generally the oldest form in which it appears, frequently one of the twelfth century. Moreover, with regard to authorities, we refer in the case of the great majority of our forms to a few, cheap, easily accessible works, whereas Stratmann's authorities are mainly the numerous and expensive publications of the Early English Text Society. Lastly, we have paid special attention to the French element in Middle-English, whereas Stratmann is somewhat deficient in respect of words of French origin¹. The book which has generally been found of most assistance to the learner is probably Halliwell's Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words; but this is not specially confined to the Middle-English period, and the plan of it differs in several respects from that of the present work.

The scope of this volume will be best understood by an explanation of

¹ A new and thoroughly revised edition of Stratmann's Dictionary is being prepared by Mr. Henry Bradley, for the Delegates of the Clarendon Press.

the circumstances that gave rise to it. Some useful and comparatively inexpensive volumes illustrative of the Middle-English period have been issued by the Clarendon Press; all of which are furnished with glossaries, explaining all the important words, with exact references to the passages wherein the words occur. In particular, the three useful hand-books containing Specimens of English (from 1150 down to 1580) together supply no less than sixty-seven characteristic extracts from the most important literary monuments of this period; and the three glossaries to these books together fill more than 370 pages of closely-printed type in double columns. The idea suggested itself that it would be highly desirable to bring the very useful information thus already collected *under one alphabet*, and this has now been effected. At the same time, a reference has in every case been carefully given to the *particular* Glossarial Index which registers each form here cited, so that it is perfectly easy for any one who consults our book to refer, not merely to the particular Index thus noted, but to the references given in that Index; and so, by means of such references, to find every passage referred to, with its proper context. Moreover the student only requires, for this purpose, a small array of the text-books in the Clarendon Press Series, instead of a more or less complete set of editions of Middle-English texts, the possession of which necessitates a considerable outlay of money. By this plan, so great a *compression* of information has been achieved, that a large number of the articles give a summary such as can be readily expanded to a considerable length, by the exercise of a very little trouble; and thus the work is practically as full of material as if it had been three or four times its present size. A couple of examples will shew what this really means.

At p. 26 is the following entry:—

'**Bi-heste**, *sb.* promise, S, S₂, C₂, P; **byheste**, S₂; **beheste**, S₂; **byhest**, S₂; **bihese**, S; **biheest**, W; **bihese**, *pl.*, S.—AS. *be-hēts*.'

By referring to the respective indexes here cited, such as S (=Glossary to Specimens of English, Part I) and the like, we easily expand this article into the following:—

'**Bi-heste**, *sb.* promise, S (9. 19); S₂ (1 a. 184); C₂ (B 37, 41, 42, F 693); P (3. 126); **byheste**, S₂ (18 b. 25); **beheste**, S₂ (14 a. 3); **byhest**, S₂ (12. 57, 18 b. 9, [where it may also be explained by *granī*]); **bihese**, S (where it is used as a plural); **biheest**, W (promise, command, Lk. xxiv. 49, Rom. iv. 13; *pl. biheestis*, Heb. xi. 13); **bihese**, S (*pl. behests*, promises, 4 d. 55).—AS. *be-hēts*.'

In order to exhibit the full meaning of this—which requires no further

explanation to those who have in hand the books denoted by S, S₂, &c.--it would be necessary to print the article at considerable length, as follows:—

'**Biheste**, *sō.* promise; "dusi *biheste*," a foolish promise, (extract from) *Ancren Riwe*, l. 19; "and wel lute wule hulde þe *biheste* þat he nom," (extract from) Robert of Gloucester, l. 184; "holdeth your *biheste*," Chaucer, *Introd. to Man of Law's Prologue*, l. 37; "*biheste* is dette," same, l. 41; "al my *biheste*," same, l. 42; "or breken his *biheste*," Chaucer, sequel to *Squieres Tale*, l. 698; "þorw fals *biheste*," *Piers Plowman*, Text B, Pass. iii, l. 126; "to voi-vulle (fulfil) þat *byheste*," *Trevisa* (extract from), lib. vi. cap. 29, l. 25; "the lond of promyssioun, or of *beheste*," *Prol. to Mandeville's Travels*, l. 3; "wip fair *by-hest*," *William and the Werwolf*, l. 57; "þe *byhest* (promise, or grant) of opere menne kyngdom," *Trevisa*, lib. vi. cap. 29, l. 9; "y schal sende the *biheest* of my fadir in-to 3ou," Wyclif, *Luke* xxiv. 49; "not bi the lawe is *biheest* to Abraham," Wycl. *Rom.* iv. 13; "whanne the *biheestis* weren not takun," Wycl. *Heb.* xi. 13; "longenge to godes *bihese*," *Old Eng. Homilies*, *Dominica iv. post Pascha*, l. 55.'

We thus obtain fifteen excellent examples of the use of this word, with the full context and an exact reference (easily verified) in every case. And, in the above instance, all the quotations lie within the compass of the eleven texts in the Clarendon Press Series denoted, respectively, by S, S₂, S₃, C, C₂, C₃, W, W₂, P, H, and G.

The original design was to make use of these text-books only; but it was so easy to extend it by including examples to be obtained from other Glossaries and Dictionaries, that a considerable selection of interesting words was added from these, mainly for the sake of illustrating the words in the Clarendon text-books. These illustrative words can be fully or partially verified by those who happen to possess all or some of the works cited, or they can safely be taken on trust, as really occurring there, any mistake being due to such authority.

A second example will make this clearer. '**Brant**, *adj.* steep, high, MD, HD; **bront**, JD; **brontest**, *superl.* S₂.—AS. *brant* (*bront*); cp. Swed. *brant*, Icel. *brattr*.'

Omitting the etymology, the above information is given in two short lines. Those who possess the 'Specimens of English' will easily find the example of the *superl. brontest*. By consulting Mätzner's, Halliwell's, and Jamieson's Dictionaries, further information can be obtained, and the full article will appear as follows:—

'**Brant**, *adj.* steep, high, MD [**brant**, **brent**, *adj.* ags. *brand*, arduus,

altus, altn. *brattr*, altschw. *branter*, schw. *brant*, *bratt*, dän. *brat*, sch. *brent*, nordengl. Diall. *brant*: cf. "*brant*, steepe," Manipulus Vocabulorum, p. 25: steil, hoch.—"Apon the bald Bucifelon *brant* up he sittes," King Alexander, ed. Stevenson, p. 124; "Thir mountaynes ware als *brant* upritze as thay had bene walles," MS. quoted in Halliwell's Dict., p. 206; "Hyze bonkkes & *brent*," Gawain and the Grene Knight, l. 2165; "Bowed to þe hy3 bonk þer *brentest* hit wern," Alliterative Poems, ed. Morris, Poem B, l. 379]; HD [*brant*, steep, *North*: "Brant against Flodden Hill," explained by Nares from Ascham, "up the steep side;" cf. Brit. Bibl. i. 132, same as *brandly*?—"And thane thay com tille wonder heghe mountaynes, and it semed as the toppes had towched the firmament; and thir mountaynes were als *brant* upritze as thay had bene walles, so that ther was na clymbyng upon thame," Life of Alexander, MS. Lincoln, fol. 38]; JD [*brent*, *adj.* high, straight, upright; "My bak, that sumtyme *brent* hes bene, Now cruikis lyk ane camok tre," Maitland Poems, p. 193; followed by a discussion extending to more than 160 lines of small print, which we forbear to quote]; *brentest*, *superl.* Sz. 13. 379 ["And bowed to þe hy3 bonk þer *brentest* hit were (MS. wern)," Allit. Poems, l. 379; already cited in Mätzner, above].

The work, in fact, contains a very large collection of words, in many variant forms, appearing in English literature and in Glossaries between A.D. 1150 and A.D. 1580. The glossaries in Sz, S3 (Specimens of English, 1298-1393, and 1394-1579) have furnished a considerable number of words belonging to the Scottish dialect, which most dictionaries (excepting of course that of Jamieson) omit.

The words are so arranged that even the beginner will, in general, easily find what he wants. We have included in one article, together with the Main Word, all the variant spellings of the glossaries, as well as the etymological information. We have also given in alphabetical order numerous cross-references to facilitate the finding of most of the variant forms, and to connect them with the Main Word. In this way, the arrangement is at once etymological and alphabetical—adapted to the needs of the student of the language and of the student of the literature.

The meanings of the words are given in modern English, directly after the Main Word. The variant forms, as given in their alphabetical position, are frequently also explained, thus saving (in such cases) the trouble of a cross-reference, if the meaning of the word is alone required.

An attempt is made in most cases to give the etymology, so far at least as to shew the immediate source of the Middle-English word. Especial pains have been taken with the words of French origin, which