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LING 200 Handout—Middle English
8 May, 2007

Compare the following passage in Middle English from the 12th century to a translation of the same passage in Modern English. What differences do you notice between the two versions? What syntactic changes have occurred since Middle English? Are there any differences in semantics?

Þa þe castles uuaren maked, þa fylðen hi mid deoules and yuele men. þa namen hi þa men þe hi wenden ðat ani god hefden, bathe be nihtes and be dæies, carlmen and wimmen, and diden heom in prisun, and pined heom efter gold and syluer untellendlice pining, for ne uuæren næure nan martyrs swa pined alse hi wæron. Me hinged up bi the fet and smoked heom mid ful smoke. Me hinged bi the þumbes other bi the hefed, and hengen bryniges on her fet. Me dide cnotted strenges abuton here hæued and uurythen it ðat it gæde to the hærnas. Hi diden heom in quarterne þar nadres and snakes and pades wæron inne, and drapen heom swa. Sume hi diden in crucethur, ðat is in an ceste þat was scort and nareu and undep, and dide scærpe stanes þerinne, and þrengde þe man þærinne, ðat him bræcon alle þe limes... Wærsæ me tilede, þe erthe ne bar nan corn, for þe land was al fordon mid suilce dædes, and hi sæden openlice ðat Christ slep, and his halechen. Suilc and mare þanne we cunnen sæin we þoleden xix wintre for ure sinnes.

When the castles were made, then filled they (them) with devils and evil men. Then seized they the people that they believed possessed any property, both by day and by night, both men and women, and put them in prison, and tortured them (with) indescribable torments in order to get gold and silver, for never were martyrs so tortured as they were. They ('One') hanged (them) up by the feet and smoked them with foul smoke. They hanged (them) by the thumbs or by the head, and hung corslets on their feet. They put knotted cords about their heads and tightened it so that it entered the brains. They put them in a cell in which were adders and snakes and toads, and killed them so. Some they put in a 'torturer', that is, in a chest which was short and narrow and shallow, and put sharp stones in it, and crushed the man in it so that all his limbs broke... Wherever people tilled, the earth bore no corn, for the land was completely ruined with such deeds, and they said openly that Christ slept, and his saints. Such, and more than we are able to tell, we suffered nineteen years for our sins.

(Source: Barber, Charles. 1993. *The English Language: A Historical Introduction*. Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics. Cambridge Univ. Press.)