Middle English Compendium

Platform: Web site (http://www.hti.umich.edu/mec/index.html)
Requirements: Internet connection with Web browser (Netscape 1.2 or higher, or equivalent).
Available from: The University of Michigan Press, PO Box 1104, 839 Greene Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1104. Tel: 734-764-4388. Fax: 734-936-0456.
Email: umpress-www@umich.edu
URL: http://www.press.umich.edu
Price: annual subscription from $525 to public libraries to $750 to large research institutions. Discounts of 15-25% for consortia, depending on the number of members.
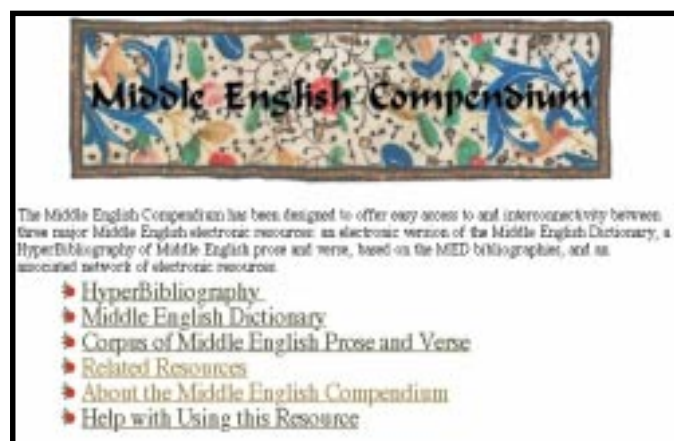

Fig.1

The Middle English Compendium of the University of Michigan offers interconnected access via the World Wide Web to the Middle English Dictionary, a HyperBibliography of Middle English Prose and Verse, and an associated network of electronic resources which includes the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse. This digital scholarly environment, centred around the electronic Dictionary of Middle English, was developed over an amazingly short period of time since the award of a grant to the University of Michigan by the National Endowment for the Humanities in June 1997. Anyone familiar with the amount of time, expertise and resources required for the creation of even a small academic digital resource will appreciate the efficiency and dedication of the Middle English Compendium team. The conversion of the MED into a searchable SGML-encoded electronic form is a task of vast proportions: one can only imagine hours of editing and proofreading claimed by thousands of MED entries, as well as the intuition and ingenuity required for the especially complicated technical operations. Any electronic publication is unforgiving of lack of consistency, and much more so the publication of a reference work. The creation of the Middle English Compendium has advanced scholarship through the updating of various features of the MED and imposing a consistency which its long publication history had previously made impossible, through the development of new features (such as a more advanced

Fig.2

bibliographic system) and in opening up many new ways using it. The MEC team has set an example of how quickly solid results can be achieved, as well as of what can be done with a carefully planned publication of a dictionary in electronic form, particularly of an already comprehensive and important resource such as the MED.

Content

The three major components of the Middle English Compendium are the Middle English Dictionary, the HyperBibliography and the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse.

The electronic Middle English Dictionary, with letters A-Wel presently online, is now up to date with the current state of the print MED. Its entries have the full features of the printed MED and include etymology, record of spelling variants and collocations, definitions and quotations with stencils identifying date, title, printed and manuscript source for each quotation. Especially useful are the three display options for the entries: with quotations hidden or displayed with two different layouts (Fig.2).

Fig.3

The MED stencils are linked to the HyperBibliography which covers all Middle English materials cited in the MED and provides bibliographical, manuscript, print and LALME references for each text; information on editions and facsimiles cited in the MED; existing electronic editions; and MED title stencils and sources of variant readings quoted in the MED (Fig.3).

The project plans to develop the HyperBibliography as its gateway to reliable electronic resources, such as digital text and image collections.

The HyperBibliography entries are linked to the Corpus of Middle English Verse and Prose—a collection of SGML-encoded Middle English texts contributed by University of Michigan faculty, the Oxford Text Archive, and created specially for the Corpus by Michigan's Humanities Text Initiative. At present the collection includes around 50 texts. The accuracy standard for texts converted from print is claimed to be 99.995% accurate reproduction from the printed source.

Fig.4

Searchability

The three major resources within the Middle English Compendium are searchable in a variety of ways.

The electronic Middle English Dictionary allows three types of searches: of headwords and forms, of entries and of quotations (see Fig.5).
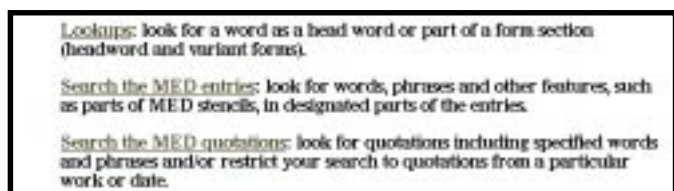

Fig.5

The search by headwords and forms makes use of wild card characters and can retrieve various spelling variants, or words which include different letter combinations such as the ending '-aunce'.

The search for entries can be limited to a particular part of an entry such as headwords, headwords and forms, definitions, bibliographical references and quotations, labels or a combination of these. The user can perform a combined search of up to three terms using Boolean operators. Thus a search *'find "chirche" in headwords and forms with "holy" in quotations'* gives 4 matches, and

a search *'find "chirche" in headwords and forms with "holy: in quotations and "fig" (used figuratively) in labels'* gives one match (fig 6).
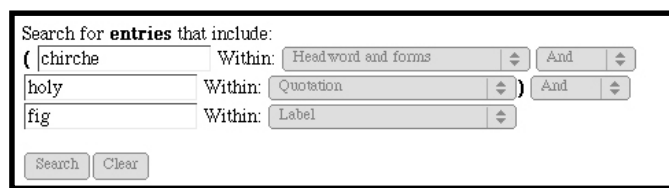

Fig.6

One further option allows proximity searching of entry definitions. Up to three terms can be entered at the same time and their location in relation to one another specified as 'near', 'not near' or 'followed/ not followed' by one another. Proximity can be defined exactly as within 40, 60 or 80 characters (fig 7).
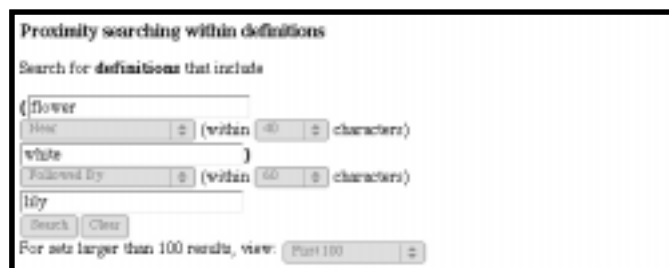

Fig.7

The search for 'flower' within forty characters of 'white' finds twelve matches including, 'flour', 'glei-glof', 'lilie', 'popie', and 'violet' which informs the user of the existence of white poppies and violets in England at that time.

A search of quotations allows the entering of up to three terms together with any desired proximity information. The user can also perform a combined search of quotation, bibliographical reference, quoted date and title. The date can be both exact and approximate: thus entering '13' into the search field brings all quotations dated by thirteen hundred (fig 8).

Fig.8

The HyperBibliography can be both browsed and searched. The browsing options are by titles arranged in an alphabetical list, by author, by MED stencils, by manuscript, by document or print. The searching options are by author, title, manuscript abbreviation and shelfmark, MED stencil, bibliographical reference (for example,
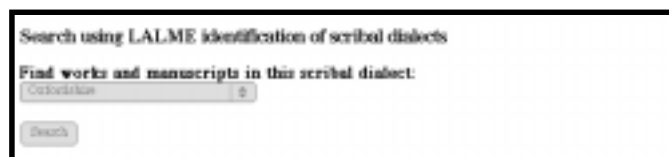

Fig.9

IMEV or IPMEP number), word or phrase. One very useful and innovative feature is searching the texts by the LALME dialects identification (fig 9).

The Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse can be browsed and searched for words and phrases as a whole or within particular works.

A proximity search for 'experience' within 80 characters of 'auctoritee' gives two matches both from the Canterbury Tales. Whilst a simple search for the phrase 'man of gret auctorite' in the entire corpus brings no results, a Boolean search for all three words occurring together within a line or a paragraph brings twenty nine results, all from prose, though none of the phrase itself. Thirteen of these hits come from the *Anthology of Chancery English* which shows that though 'auctoritee' itself was commonly used, Chaucer's phrase at the end of the *House of Fame* was not a common legal (or other) set phrase. The disappointing absence of 'man of gret auctorite' is interestingly counterbalanced by the presence of a 'lady of gret auctorite'—a search which gives one hit (fig 10).
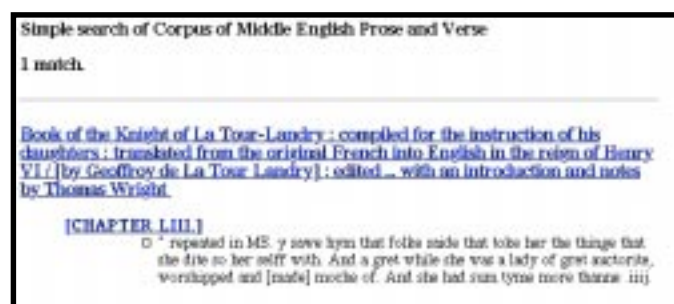

Fig.10

Incomplete as the results of this small investigation may be, they still prove useful. And the learning of all this and the searching itself only occupied around twenty enjoyable minutes of my time. The usefulness of searching the Corpus will increase proportionally to its size and we hope that the collection will continue to grow.

Conclusions

The Middle English Compendium is major achievement and a powerful resource of modern scholarship in Medieval English. Much of its capacity comes from the searchability and interconnectivity of its resources. The MEC is user-friendly, providing online help and explanations, and is fast and easy to navigate. Search forms require minimum typing, the results are clearly presented.

Access to the project is subscription-based whilst at the same time is being continually developed. It functions successfully in its developing state and some effort has been made to provide guidance to the unfinished features. The resource remains open for potentially endless development, and with so much achieved already, it promises to continue being a tremendous contribution to Middle English scholarship.

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