A Middle English Reconstruction of the Present-Day English Hymn "There Is a Green Hill Far Away"

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There is a Green Hill Far Away

1) There is a grene hylle fer aweye.
There is a green hill far away.

wyth-owtyn a cittes weall.
without a city wall.

quer ye derre Lord wes crucyfiede,
where the dear Lord was crucified,

wha dide sauen alle vs.
who died to save us all.

2) Wee mowen-nat know we kunne telle.
We may not know we cannot tell,

but peynes He adde for in boren.
what pains He had to bear.

but wee beleve hit wes for has
but we believe it was for us

He heengeth ond soffrede yeer.
He hung and suffered there.

3) Yer nas na nother guid inoh
There was no other good enough

pay-gen symes pris.
to pay the price for sin.

He ani couthe vnlok hewyneg gate
He only could unlock the gate

ond lett us yn.
(of heav’n) and let us in.

4) O derli, derely He hath ylouen!
Oh dearly, dearly has He loved!

and wee moste love Him to-too,
and we must love Him too.

ond truste [in] His raymende blood,
and trust in His redeeming blood,

and trye for to doo His werkys.
and try His works to do.

(written by Cecil Frances Alexander)
Introduction:

As a religious people, we are encouraged to memorize and become familiar with our favorite hymns. Words, the basic building blocks of our language, attempt to convey the meaning which hymns promulgate. Because the shift in connotations and denotations of words interests us, we have chosen as our project to diachronically analyze a Present-Day English (PDE) text. We have chosen as our text Cecil Frances Alexander’s hymn “There is a Green Hill Far Away.” By dissecting and reconstructing the words of this hymn, we hope to become more familiar with the English language and more specifically the Middle English period.

In the course of our study we have concentrated on the differences between the Present-Day lexicon of this hymn and that of our reconstructed Middle English version. We have specifically created our version by using words from approximately A.D. 1400. Where possible, we have noted phonetic, morphological, and syntactical features.

NB: To avoid redundancy, multiple variants will be listed only once. Also, variants are not necessarily in the same tense. We do not aim for historical accuracy; we base our critique on the idea that the prevailing sentiment during ME is variation of features.

Verse One:
(1) Dær es (2) a grene hylle (3) fer aweye,
(4) wyth-owtyn (5) a cittes weall,
(6) quer (7) y derre Lord (8) wes crucyfiede,
(9) wha dide (10) sauen alle vs.

1. “There” as a demonstrative adverb is used unemphatically to introduce a sentence or clause in which, for emphasis’ sake, verb comes before subject (especially with the verb “to be”). According to dialect the vowel could be represented by <æ>, <æ>, <ee>, <o>, and <a>.

The singular present indicative verb “is” from the OE verb “wesan” prevails over the older plural present indicative “sind(on),” which is lost entirely. It is shown with varied spellings: “es,” “is,” and “ys.”

2. The indefinite articles “a” and “an” come from the OE for “one.” It is inflected as an adjective. The “a” before consonants, and the “an” before vowel rule was followed in ME but not as consistently as in PDE. One alternate version is “anre.”

“Green” is used in this instance as an adjective signifying “to be covered with a growth of herbage or foliage; verdant.”

“Hill” carries the PDE denotation of a rise in the landscape. Its variants are “hyl” and “hille.”

3. “Far” means at a great distance: a long way off. It is often used with the adverbs “away,” “off,” and “out.” The alternate form “ferrer” is often used, although this may be the comparative.

“Away” comes from the IE idiom “on one’s way,” originally used in OE as “on-we3” and later evolved into “a-we3” and “a-weie.”

4. The archaic literary preposition “without” means outside of an inclosing boundary (as opposed to “within”). There are many variants including “wid-uten,” “wid-utan” (OE), “without,” and “wid-uten.”

5. (See 2. for “a/an”) In English, “City,” a borrowing from French, is found early in the thirteenth century and applied to particularly ancient cities. In OE the term is “burg.” Variations are “cite,” and “cytee.”

In ME the possessive is formed with “‘s” more than in PDE. We chose to use this form because it is a particular wall belonging to a certain city.

“Wall” a Saxon and Anglo-Frisian adoption of the Latin word “vallum.” It is a fortifying structure surrounding a city used for military defense. Variants are “walle,” “wallis” (pl), “walles” (pl), and “walleys” (pl).

6. “Where,” the simple relative of the antecedent place, introduces a defining or restrictive clause and completes the sense of “in” or “at which.” Alternate versions are “quhar,” “quhair,” “wher,” and “whor.” The <qu> is a northern representation of /M/.

7. “The” as a definite article has reached its PDE usage, only varying in <t> and <th>.

ME used the <y> to represent /h/ after the advent of the printing press (as the thorn was a difficult typeface to create.)

“Dear” means regarded with personal feelings of high affection, held in deep esteem. The earlier sense of “valued” had such a gradual change into “loved” that it is not marked as a separate category. Variations are only between the single and double <t>.
“Lord” is absent from other Teutonic languages. Its original meaning is “bread-keeper” (Hlaforde, or Lauerd); the /l/ is dropped in the fourteenth century and by the fifteenth century it carries the PDE spelling.

8. “Was” is the past tense of the verb “wesan.” Its variations are “watz,” “was,” and “wys.” It is used here as a verb phrase to show tense, a practice which begins in ME.

“Crucified,” borrowed from Old French in the twelfth century, denotes any ignominious death. This definition has since narrowed to mean only death by crucifixion. The OE word for “cross” is “rood.”

9. “Who” is a simple relative pronoun introducing a clause or a restricting antecedent, thus completing the sense. Another version is “quha.” We are assuming that /a/, in this instance, is a dialectal pronunciation.

The verb “to die” was not known in OE; they used the verbs “steorfan” and “ignweltan,” which have narrowed in PDE to denote only a certain manner of death. “To die” was readopted from Old Norse in the fourteenth(?) century. Another variant is “deghit” (past).

10. “To save” means to deliver a soul from sin and its consequences or to admit to eternal bliss. The infinitives in ME often end with the <en>, which is why we added this ending to the versions we found: “suue” and “sauyd” (past).

In the nominative, “all” was formerly often prefixed, i.e.: “all we” vs. “all of us.” “All” is common to all Teutonic languages. By this time in ME pronouns have generally settled into their PDE usage. “Us” has the variations of “vs” and “hus” (probably a dialectal difference).

Verse Two:

(1) Wee mowen-nat know (2) we kunne telle,
(3) Þat peynes (4) He adde for to boren,
(5) but wee beleve (6) hit wes (7) for hus
(8) He heengeth (9) ond soffrede (10) Þeer.

1. The <ee> in “wee” shows the use of doubling to show length of vowel. Vowel length was also shown by <ij>, <ow>, <æ>.

“May” belongs to the Teutonic class of preterite-presents which were originally thematic present tense words with weak root-vowels. By analogy they become present participles. “Mowen” is the case used to show plurality of subject.

“Ne” is the common negating adverb during OE, but during ME “not” begins to appear.

“Know” is a common Teutonic and Aryan verb now used only in English. It originally had two senses: to gain truth with the senses and to gain it with the intellect. Eventually these two senses collapse together and lose distinction.

2. “Kunne” stems from the verb “can” (able to know) plus the negative affix “ne.” Scribes in ME liked to contract words, especially negatives, i.e., nas, kunne, nit, etc. Variants include “can-not,” and “can [subject] non . . .”

“Telle” means to mention or name a series of things one after another in order; to enumerate. Past tense= telde.

3. “Þat” in this sense is used as “that [subject] which/who . . .”

“Peynes” connotes penalty or punishment. Variant: payne.

4. “Adde for to . . .” signifies “to possess as a duty or thing to be done,” with object and dative infinitive expressing what is to be done by subject. Variants: hadde, hauynge . . . for to . . .

We chose to represent “bear” as “boren” because it is being used as the infinitive, which in ME is represented by <en>. The vowel change shows that it is a strong verb. Variant: bere.

5. “But” is used as a conjunction with a clause; “to hold it as true that . . .”; “to be of the opinion . . .”; “to think.” It later gains the meaning of “nevertheless,” as opposed to “contrary to . . .”

“Believe” gains a learned spelling in PDE to match “relieve.”

6. “Hit” is the common ME neuter pronoun.

7. “For” is a preposition signifying “in place of,” “in stead of” (i.e., “in order to save one’s life.”)

“Hus” is the first person plural dative pronoun, in this case used as an object of a preposition.

8. “Heengeth” = third person singular past tense of “to hang,” which means in ME “to fasten up or suspend on a cross: to crucify.” Variants: hangiden (pl), henge, heengen (pl).

9. “Ond,” a dialectal version of a positive conjunction, is used the same way in PDE. Variant: and.
“Soffrede,” third person singular past tense verb, is a borrowing from Old French. Variants: sufferith, soffre, suffred, suffrand, souered.

10. The demonstrative adverb, “Peer,” means in or at that place, in the place referred to and away from the speaker (opposite “here”). Variants: eir, ere.

Verse Three:

(1) Yer nas (2) na nother (3) guid inoh
(4) payzen (5) synnes priss
(6) He anli (7) couthe vnlok (8) hewyneȝ ȝate
(9) ond lett us yn.

1. “Yer” (see vs. 1 “y-”). “Nas” is a contracted negative form of the past tense “to be” = PDE wasn’t.

2. “Na nother” is commonly used with singular subject qualified by “an,” “any,” “some,” “no,” or preceded by a negative expressed or implied. “Na” is a northern dialectal pronunciation (i.e., Scots). ME also divides “a nother”; so “na nother” the negative = none other, or no other. Variants: oother, othir.

3. “Guid,” a northern pronunciation = “good.” “Inoh,” a gradable qualifier, means sufficient in quantity or degree to fulfill a purpose. Variants: enow, enoh, ȝenoȝi (ON), gnogt.

4. “Payzen” is the ME infinitive “to pay.” (Again we see the <en> inflective ending.) Borrowed from OF “pâie” and the Latin “pacare.” The OF meaning is to appease, satisfy, or please; Latin = to appease, satisfy, or reduce to peace. In PDE it is a transitive verb meaning to give to (a person) what is due in discharge of a debt. Variants: paieȝe, payede, payit, paize, i-payde (p. ppl.), payne.

5. We chose this syntax “synnes priss” because in ME the genitive is more commonly formed with the <e> than with a prepositional phrase.

“Synne” is borrowed from ON (Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish) = “synd” (the Finnish = “syntii”). The stem is possibly related to the Latin “sons.” The meaning gives a general sense of “offense, wrong-doing, or misdeed”; an act which is regarded as a transgression of the Divine law and an offense against God; a violation (esp. wilfull or deliberate) of some religious or moral principle. Variant: synnus.

“Priss” is borrowed from OF. (Modern French = prie). Latin = “pretium.” ME “priss” has all the OF senses of price, value, honor, prize, and praise. The /i:/ of ME “priss” is variously represented by <ë>, <ë⟩, <i>, <i⟩, <y>, and <i> and is later indicated by the final <e> (i.e., price). To avoid the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ between two vowels, “priss” is changed to “price,” which is a learned spelling as in “dice” and “twice.” Variants: pryys, priys.

6. “Anli” is an adjective meaning one of which there exist no more, or no others of the kind (exclusively). Usually preceded by the “” or a possessive pronoun or case. Variants: anly, aneli, anely, onli, oonly, onlíc, oonly, ondlý, ondléy, wonly, and wonlych.

7. “Couthe” is a preterite-present verb auxiliary of tense, mood, or predication. (The PDE <t> is a learned spelling to match “should” and “would.”) “Vnlok” is a transitive verb meaning to make open to all (chiefly figurative). Variants: vnlockt, vnlokked (both past).

8. We chose “hewyneȝ ȝate” for the same reason as (vs. 3 #5)—it follows the same genitive form.

“Hewyne” means the celestial abode of immortal beings; the habitation of God and His angels, and of beatified spirits, usually placed in the realms beyond the sky; the state of the blessed hereafter. Variants: hevene (southern dialect), heven (northern), hefen, hefon, and hefon. “ȝate.” borrowed from ON “gat,” is a means of reaching (something) by way of access. Etymologically obscure, possibly related to the verb “get” (into a receptacle or cavity). Variant: yates.

9. “Lett.” borrowed from MHG “lazen” and ON “lata,” means to allow to pass or go, to admit to or into a place (in this instance into the gate). Variant: lete.

“Yn,” from OE “into,” carries its same PDE meaning. “Into” carries the proper sense of “in[s]” meaning.

Verse Four:

(1) O derli, derely (2) He hath ylouen!
(3) and wee moste love (4) Him to-too,
(5) ond truste (6) His raymende blood,
(7) and trye (8) His werkys (9) for to doo.

1. “O,” an interjection, is used as an intensifier. “Derli” (repeated twice for emphasis) is an
adverb meaning as one who is held dear, with feelings of tender affection: affectionately or fondly. (At this time “derli” is used only with the verb “love” or its equivalents.)

2. We chose the syntax “He hath ylouen” because we did not want to split the verb phrase.

“Hath” is the third person singular pluperfect auxiliary verb.

“Ylouen” is possibly borrowed from MDu “lieven” or the feminine “love” or the MHG “lieben,” which means endear. Religious use, applied in an eminent sense to the paternal benevolence and affection of God toward His children or to the affectionate devotion due to God from His creatures, and to the affection of one created being to another so far as it is prompted by the sense of their common relationship to God. The <y> prefix in ME is the past participle marker. Variants: loue, love.

3. “Moste love” in the sense of “mote” (a verb expressing necessity or obligation), past indicative = had to, was obliged to, it was necessary that (I) should . . . This is a speculated incidence of metathesis where “motes” -> “moste.” Variant: most.

4. “To-too” signifies the inclusive/also. It is not spelled “too” until the sixteenth century. ME apocopated northern forms “ta” and “tan,” for “take” and “taken,” with the rounded /a/ in north midland speech, or transliterated by midland or southern writers to “to” and “ton”; in the past tense, “to” was apocopated from the original “toc” an Anglicized Scottish /a/ to /o/. (Every instance before A.D. 1500 which we found for this particular meaning was written in the “to-too” form.)

5. “Truste” (used here in the infinitive) is borrowed from ON “traust” and means a confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing, or of the truth of a statement; very commonly used with “in,” “of,” “on,” “upon,” “to,” or “unto.” (Out of literary license, we left “in” out of this verse.) Variants: trost, troste.

6. “His” is the third person masculine genitive pronoun. By now it has a fixed spelling. The capital <H> is used to show respect for deity.

“Raymende” comes from Latin “redimere,” which means to buy back, and from OF “raembr,” which is represented in ME by the transitive verb “raim,” which is the stem of “raimbre” or “reimbre.” “Raim” means to put to ransom or to exact ransom from. We chose the “-mende” suffix because in ME it is used to show the derivational and progressive: i.e., He continues to redeem (progressive tense of redeeming), and His blood is redemptive (derivational adjective redeeming). Variant: rayme.

“Blood” is used in the Bible and theological language for blood shed in sacrifice (especially the atoning sacrifice of Christ). By this time it has a fixed spelling.

7. “Trye” means to test one’s ability to deal with (something). To attempt to do (perform), or to accomplish (an action); to venture upon.

8. “Werkys” is borrowed from ON “verk.” It means something that is or was done: what a person does or did; an act, deed, proceeding, or business. It also means actions or doings (often collectively). Variants: werke, werk.

9. The “for” in “for to doo” shows obligation. “To doo” is the dative infinitive verb. Variants: to donne, to done, to don, to done, and to doinde.

Conclusion

By dissecting and analyzing the words of this hymn, we have thoroughly familiarized ourselves with “There Is a Green Hill Far Away.” This hymn has been internalized, ingested, and slumbered upon, never to be seen in the same way again.

We found this exercise to be an eye-opening and inspiring experience, an exquisite pedagogical tool. This type of research broadens the students’ level of language usage, not exclusively that of a religious register, but that of a literary and historical registers as well. Through studying the histories of these words, we have become more aware of the meanings of all words. This in turn will open the passages of our communication and make us better people.

Works Cited


Old English Dictionary.