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VOLATEN AND VOLATING: TWO GHOST WORDS IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH DICTIONARY

The Middle English Dictionary lists the verb volaten and the gerund volating as independent entries. The verb is said to mean '[t]o be nauseated; also, feel nauseated by (food and drink, or what one has already consumed), feel loathing for', the definition for the gerund being '[f]eeling nauseated (by food and drink)'. As concerns the origin of the verb, the dictionary suggests, with a question mark, that it may be Medieval Latin volatus, past participle of volare.¹ The etymology put forth is presumably motivated by the possibility of nausea leading to vomiting (cf. the phrasal verb throw up). The five citations for volaten and the one for volating come from a single work, Faye Getz's edition of a Middle English translation of Gilbertus Anglicus' Compendium medicinae.² Several copies of the translation survive in medieval manuscripts, the one edited by Getz being found in Wellcome Library MS 537, fols. 48r–310v.³

¹ Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn, and Robert E. Lewis (eds.), Middle English Dictionary (Ann Arbor, 1952–2001). Consulted online at <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>. Hereafter MED.

² Faye M. Getz (ed.), Healing and Society in Medieval England: A Middle English Translation of the Pharmaceutical Writings of Gilbertus Anglicus, Wisconsin Publications in the History of Science and Medicine 8 (Madison, 1991).

³ Consulted online at <<http://wellcomelibrary.org/collections/digital-collections/medieval-manuscripts/>>.

A close examination of Wellcome Library MS 537 shows that in the six example passages cited in the MED, the two words in fact begin with the letter w, not with the sequence vo. The spellings that occur on those folios are respectively wlatip (fol. 60r), wlaten (fol. 169r), wlate (fol. 191r), wlaten (fol. 270r), wlatep (fol. 194v), and wlating (fol. 234v). The scribe's way of forming the letter w is different from his shaping of the first two letters in words like voice (e.g. fols. 134v and 147r) and vomep 'foams' (fol. 270v). The verb wlaten 'become nauseated' and the gerund wlating 'nausea' are frequently attested in Middle English writings.⁴ In Old English manuscripts, the forms wlatian, wlatung, and wlætung occur in similar senses.⁵ The words apparently became obsolete soon after the Middle English period, as the last citation of wlate v. in the Oxford English Dictionary is dated c1535, there being no recorded instances of wlating n. after the fifteenth century.⁶ The disappearance coincides with the falling away of the consonant group wl- in initial position, a development that took place by the sixteenth century.⁷

The entries for volaten and volating should be removed from the MED and the relevant citations placed under wlaten v.(1) and wlating(e ger.).

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⁴ MED s.vv. wlaten v.(1) and wlating(e ger.).

⁵ Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (London, 1898) s.vv.

⁶ John Simpson and Michael Proffitt (eds.), The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, 2000–). Consulted online at <<http://www.oed.com>>. Accessed 25 January 2017, when the two entries had not yet been fully updated for the third edition. No post-1500 occurrences of wlating are found in the works included in the corpus of my Dictionary of Medical Vocabulary in English, 1375–1550: Body Parts, Sicknesses, Instruments, and Medicinal Preparations (Abingdon, 2016).

⁷ Wilhelm Horn and Martin Lehnert, Laut und Leben: Englische Lautgeschichte der neueren Zeit (1400–1950) (Berlin, 1954), II, 1072.