

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Douglas Moffat, 'Umbiden and Umbreiden: An Unnoticed Middle English Prefix', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 26 (1995), 29-34

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123709&silos_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

Umbiden and Umbreiden: An Unnoticed Middle English Prefix

Douglas Moffat

Among the many Middle English (ME) derivations of the common Old English (OE) verbs *bidan* and *bregdan*, two of the most noteworthy are *umbiden* and *umbreiden*, each of which yields derivations of its own, specifically the adverb *umbidingli*, the noun *umbreid(e)*, and the gerund *umbreidinge*. Their noteworthiness owes nothing to meaning: *umbiden* and *umbreiden* have the same general semantic range as other ME derivations of *bidan* and *bregdan*. Rather, what is peculiar about each is their prefix *um-*. I will attempt to prove in what follows that, though rare, this prefix ought to be regarded as a distinctive ME form.

The *um-* in *umbiden* and *umbreiden* should not be confused with the more common ME prefix of the same spelling. This latter form represents either Scandinavian *um-*, a reduction of earlier *umb-*, or reduced OE *ymb-*. In fact, a coalescence of the two in the North and Northeast Midlands, the dialect areas where this prefix is most common, cannot be ruled out. This *um-* prefix usually lends to the action of the root verb the sense of encirclement, e.g., *umclippen* 'to surround (sth.), enclose' or *umsetten* 'to besiege (a city), surround (sth.)', etc. This basic sense of encirclement can be extended to one of envelopment, e.g., *umshaden* 'to wrap (sb.)' or *umlappen* 'to clothe or wrap (sb.), envelop (sth.)'. In words having to do with thinking or speaking, e.g., *umsen* or *umthinken*, the prefix has the meaning 'about, concerning, in regard to'. It is not uncommon for this prefix to be attached to roots that themselves contain aspects of encirclement or envelopment; that is, it may act either as an intensifier or even be redundant.

The *um-* prefix in *umbiden* and *umbreiden*, while identical in form to the more common prefix from Scand. *um-* and/or OE *ymb-*, is clearly unconnected to it, as a glance at the evidence will demonstrate. There are five certain occurrences of *umbiden* in the records of the Middle English Dictionary (MED) and three additional

forms whose connection with this word might be doubted, because the prefix is written *un-* in two cases and simply *u-* in another.¹ These doubtful forms will be discussed below. The two earliest attestations, from John of Grimestone's *Preaching Book* (1372), are, in fact, the two that exhibit *un-*. Of the remaining six occurrences, five, including the form in *u-*, are found in the Harley 2254 version of *The Prickyng of Love*. The other occurrence is in Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*. (The most recent editor of the *The Prickyng of Love* suggests that Hilton may have been its author.) Six of these eight instances reveal intransitive usages meaning 'to wait, abide' or 'to delay, tarry', e.g., *Scale of Perfection* 1.54.36b: 'If þou wilt finden ihesu . . . þe bihouiþ sufferen and vmbiden a while þerinne.'² Two transitive usages appear, both from *The Prickyng of Love*, e.g., 122/19, 'He shal not þer-fore despeir, but vmbide pacientli þe grace of god.'³ The same work yields the two attestations of the adverb *umbidingli* 'patiently'.⁴

The verb *umbreiden* was perhaps more common than *umbiden*. It too had intransitive and transitive meanings: 'to reproach someone, censure' and 'to reproach (sb.), censure, upbraid', e.g., from the Bodley 959 version of the Wycliffite Bible, glossing *improperes* in Ecclus. 41.28, 'Whan þou hast 3yuen, ne vmbreide þou';⁵ Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 5.5034, 'If so be that he him umbreide . . . It schal ben venged on him'.⁶ The noun *umbreid(e)* means 'reproach, disgrace' or 'a reproach, an insult', e.g., in the Trinity College, Cambridge, version of *Cursor Mundi* 16718, 'þe ton him 3af vmbreide'.⁷ The gerund *umbreidinge* means 'upbraiding, casting of reproach', e.g., *Mirror of Lewed Men and Women* 126/8, 'The synnes of þe mouth ben these: ydel speche . . . vmbraidinge'.⁸ Like *umbiden*, *umbreiden* and its derivations are attested in late fourteenth- and in fifteenth-century manuscripts. In what would seem to be its earliest occurrence, in the early fourteenth-century lyric 'Ne mai no lewed', the prefix is spelt *un-*; this form is discussed in footnote 18 below.

It should be clear from this brief survey of the evidence that the *um-* prefix does not impart to the simplexes *biden* or *breiden* any of the meanings outlined above for the more common *um-* prefix. Nor do the simplexes themselves have meanings associated with encirclement or envelopment that would allow the prefix to be regarded as an intensifying or redundant usage of the common form. In fact, it is difficult to imagine either *umbiden* or *umbreiden* having anything at all to do with encirclement or envelopment. Furthermore, while most of the evidence for these two verbs and their derivations can be connected with the North, the Northeast Midlands, or at least the East Midlands, *umbreiden* occurs in Gower and in the

Fairfax copy of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, more southerly occurrences than the common form of the prefix usually has.⁹

The Oxford English Dictionary does not treat *umbiden*. For *umbreiden* OED's etymological note reads: 'Alteration of *Upbraid* v., under the influence of verbs in *Um-*'. It is hard to imagine, given the dissimilarity in meaning just discussed, what the influence of the common prefix *um-* could be, unless its occurrence created a linguistic climate in which another *um-* prefix could be tolerated. However, the posited connection between *upbreiden* and *umbreiden* proves crucial in explaining the latter's development.

Only one instance of OE *upbregdan* meaning 'to censure, reproach' has survived, in the Pseudo-Wulfstan homily HomU 39 (Nap48) 48, 'þæt þu þæt god zefylle, þe þu canst, þe læs þe god upbrede, þone godspellican cwide'.¹⁰ The phrase *bregdan up* 'to pull (sth.) up, weigh anchor' also occurs [See Dictionary of Old English *bregdan* 1.c.i]. While apparently rare in OE, the two senses conveyed by the OE evidence, 'to lift (sth.) up' and 'to offer reproach, criticize' both become well established in thirteenth-century ME for *upbreiden*, e.g., Laȝamon's *Brut* 8244, 'He hine upbræid swulc he hine to-breken wolde';¹¹ *Soul's Ward* 14/134, 'Ha wið hokeres edwiteð & upbreideð euchan his sunnen'.¹² The sense involving censuring or reproach was apparently more common than that involving actual physical motion, to judge from the MED evidence. The noun *upbreid* 'a reproach, reproof' is also much in evidence by the thirteenth century, e.g., *Hali Meidhad* 17/5, 'Hit is sorhe to hire & to al his cun scheome, upbrud in uel muð'.¹³

The prefix *up-* in *upbreiden*, while it has survived to the present day, was far from stable in ME, and I suggest that this instability led to the form *umbreiden*. Simplification of the bilabial sequence *-pb-* to *-bb-* is found, particularly in the noun, e.g., the Gonville and Caius version of *Ancrene Wisse* 56/29, 'þe þridde, schendful prude & ubbrud';¹⁴ *Speculum of Guy of Warwick* 537, 'zif þi neiheboure misdoþ þe . . . Or in dede, or in vbbreid . . . For-zif hit him';¹⁵ *Northern Homily (2) PSanct* 310/91, 'þis Pharesens for vbbreide . . . seide'.¹⁶ The tendency for noun stress to fall on the first syllable would have created an environment conducive to this change, but the same development occurs in the verb, e.g., *Shorter New Testament(1)* James 1.5, 'God . . . obbraydeþ no man'.¹⁷ I would suggest that the resulting sequence, *ubb-*, with the likely coalescence of the bilabial stops, created an environment that would in turn give rise to a homorganic nasal, *m*, to ease the transition from the vowel of the prefix to the bilabial stop at the beginning of the root, i.e., to *umb-*. While it is dangerous to put too much emphasis on the

chronology of the surviving ME evidence, especially when the sample is small, the alternative, transitional form of the noun *upbreid* in *-bb-* has certainly appeared by the early fourteenth century, before any certain occurrences of *umbreid(e)* or *umbreiden*.¹⁸ Chronology would appear to support, then, the development from *upb-* through *ubb-* to *umb-* that I am proposing.

The development of *umbiden* is less easy to explain. No OE form **upbidan* is recorded, so the same phonological route that led from *upbreiden* to *umbreiden* cannot be convincingly suggested for *umbiden*. Perhaps it developed from the ME reflex of OE *anbidan/onbidan*. The existence of the previously mentioned form *umbiden*, e.g., John of Grimestone's *Preaching Book* p. 21, '3if þu fle, senne folwith nouth, 3if þu vnvide, sche comth vnsouth', reveals that the atonic *a-* or *o-* of the OE prefix used before a verb could become *u-* in ME.¹⁹ This form will probably be treated as a variant of *anbid(i)en* rather than an error for *umbiden* in the MED. However, is it possible that bilabial nasal *m* could have been substituted for the alveolar *n* when *u-* had developed before it? Ease of pronunciation, as with *umbreide(n)*, would have been a phonological motivation for the change, and an effort to distinguish the prefix from the very common *un-* may have also been a factor that led to *um-* in this word.

The ME prefix *um-* that appears before *umbiden* and *umbreiden*, then, would seem to derive by phonological processes from other OE prefixes that occur with the same simplexes in ME. One might suggest, contrary to OED, that this prefix developed in spite of the more common *um-* prefix, rather than under its influence, since the meaning of the latter clearly has no impact on the former. In fact, like the ME reflexes of many OE prefixes, such as *a-*, *an-*, and *on-*, the *um-* of *umbiden* and *umbreiden* seems to be virtually empty of semantic content.

Despite its very limited occurrence and its phonological derivation from other known prefixes, *um-* in *umbiden* and *umbreiden* ought to be considered a separate ME prefix, although not accorded that status before now. Both verbs have derivations of their own, which speak to a medieval perception of them as independent words rather than phonological variants of *anbidan*, on the one hand, and *upbreiden*, on the other. Further, *umbreiden* was so well established that the OED records occurrences through the sixteenth century, after which it was undoubtedly replaced by its close relation and probable progenitor, *upbraid*.

NOTES

¹ The evidence for this paper is based on MED materials, and it must be borne in mind that the dictionary's reading program is an inevitably partial and skewed selection of what remains from ME. References are given in MED style, although the stencil titles have been expanded and clarified. I have relied in part on the editorial work of two of my colleagues, G. W. Abernethy and Jeffery Singman, and the advice of a third, Elizabeth Stevens Girsch.

² Barbara E. Wykes, 'An Edition of Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1957).

³ *The Prickyng of Love*, ed. Harold Kane, 2 vols, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan & Renaissance Studies 91: 10 (Salzburg, 1983).

⁴ At 31/21 and 80/1. The form *umbindingli*, the Trinity College, Cambridge, variant at 31/21, is probably an error for *umbidingli*.

⁵ *MS Bodley 959: Genesis-Baruch 3.20 in the Earliest Version of the Wycliffite Bible*, ed. Conrad Lindberg, Vol. 4, Stockholm Studies in English, 13 (Stockholm, 1965).

⁶ *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, Vol. 2, EETS es 52 (London, 1801; rpt. 1969). There is a peculiar usage of the verb in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* l. 1441. Hengwrt reads here 'How trew . . . was Alcebiades loue, that rather for to dyen chees, Than for to suffre his body vnburied be.' At least eight manuscripts have the form *umbreide*, *umbreided*, etc. Perhaps *ben umbreided* could be interpreted as meaning 'to be defiled', but it would be the only such occurrence of the word with this usage.

⁷ *Cursor Mundi*, ed. Richard Morris, Part 3, EETS os 62 (London, 1876).

⁸ *A Myroure to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, ed. Venetta Wilson, Middle English Texts Series 14 (Heidelberg, 1988).

⁹ The *Legend of Good Women* occurrence is at l. 1671 where other versions have *upbreiden*. This line is not included in the portion of the Fairfax text printed in *Odd Texts of Chaucer's Minor Poems*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall (London, 1868-80), pp. 139-49.

¹⁰ *Wulfstan*, ed. Arthur Napier (Berlin, 1883), 248/9. This occurrence is treated by Bosworth-Toller as a phrase in *bregdan*.

¹¹ *Lazamon: Brut*, ed. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, Vol. 2, EETS os 277 (London, 1978).

¹² *Sawles Warde*, ed. R. M. Wilson, Leeds School of English Language Texts and Monographs 3 (Leeds, 1938).

¹³ *Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett, EETS os 284 (London, 1982).

¹⁴ *The English Text of the Ancre Riwele, edited from Gonville and Caius Colleges MS 234/120*, ed. R. M. Wilson, EETS os 229 (London, 1954).

¹⁵ *Speculum Gy de Warewyke*, ed. Georgiana Lea Morrill, EETS es 75 (London, 1898).

¹⁶ 'Proprium Sanctorum des Ms Vernon', ed. C. Horstmann, *Archiv*, 81 (1888), 310.

¹⁷ *A Fourteenth Century English Biblical Version*, ed. Anna C. Paues (Cambridge, 1904).

¹⁸ The only exception occurs in the early fourteenth-century 'Ne mai no lewed', mentioned in passing earlier: *So grimly he on me gredes, þat y ne mot me lede þer wiþ mi lawe, on alle maner opes þat heo wulleþ awe, heore boc ase vn-bredes*; 'Satire on the Consistory Courts' in *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York, 1950), p. 25, ll. 9-12. I interpret the last clause to mean 'their books censure ease', but I confess to finding the poem quite obscure at many levels. The question must be entertained whether this early fourteenth-century form is indeed an error for *umbreiden* or the only surviving ME attestation for OE *onbregdan*. If the latter is the case, then it may be that *umbreiden* is not solely a phonological development from *upbreiden* but also a blend with otherwise unattested **onbreiden*.

¹⁹ *A Descriptive Index of the English Lyrics of John of Grimestone's Preaching Book*, ed. Edward Wilson, *Medium Ævum Monographs*, 2 (Oxford, 1973). The *un-* forms of *anbid(i)en* v. given in the MED are from the 1532 version of Usk's *Testament of Love*.