Reference: Chaucer's Middle English

Chaucer's Middle English

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Variety

The history of the English language is traditionally divided into the following periods: Old English (650-1100), Middle English (1100-1500), Early Modern English (1500-1800), Late Modern English (1800-present day) (for a general overview see Horobin 2016). To a modern reader turning to Chaucer's work for the first time, the immediate impression is of considerable linguistic chaos and confusion. This is especially true for modern readers accustomed to the world of Standard English and the fixity of the printed book. But, where Chaucer's language may at first appear disordered, much of its apparent irregularity can be explained by reference to the language's historical development. As the term "Middle" English implies, the period in which Chaucer wrote was one of considerable flux and change, in which the Old English spoken by the Anglo-Saxons (a language that resembles Modern German more closely than it does Modern English) was transformed into Early Modern English—a term that emphasizes its position as the foundation of the language spoken throughout the world today.

Chaucer wrote during the final decades of the fourteenth century; hence, his language belongs to the later Middle English period. An important feature of the division between the Middle and the Early Modern periods was the emergence of a standard written variety of English. While dialect variation has been a feature of spoken English throughout its history, the Middle English period was characterised by considerable variety in writing too. So, where Modern English has just one way of spelling most words (setting aside the small number of variants between US and British English, such as *color* and *colour*), there were numerous ways of spelling common words in Middle English. The word *not*, for instance, might appear as *nat*, *noght*, *nawt*, *naught*, *naȝt* and many other similar forms. It is because of this dialectal variation that reading Chaucer's Middle English is quite a different experience from reading the works of his contemporaries, such as *Piers Plowman* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which were both written in dialects of the West Midlands. Since he was a Londoner by birth, Chaucer's works are written in the dialect of that city. The prominence of the city of London meant that it formed the basis of the standard language, but this was a later, fifteenth-century, development. In Chaucer's day, London English carried no greater status than any other dialect.

As in many modern cities, the language spoken on the streets of Chaucer's London was characterized by considerable diversity—the result of large-scale immigration into the capital during the fourteenth century. Although it is historically an East Midland dialect, London

English of this period was influenced by a variety of non-metropolitan dialects, as speakers from different parts of the country migrated to London in search of work. During the early part of the fourteenth century, immigration was greatest from East Anglia; in the second half of that century, it was focused more on the Central and North Midlands. The result was a linguistic melting pot; where Modern English is characterized by standardization and regularity, Chaucer's Middle English was dynamic and unregulated.

Since the eighteenth century, writers have sought to stabilize and regulate the English language; variation and change were seen as disruptive and hostile to serious literary endeavor. However, variation in spelling, grammar, and pronunciation can be of considerable use to a poet, and there are many instances in Chaucer's works where he draws upon this licensed variation where rhyme or meter demands it. Let's take the adjective *merry* as an example. In Old English, this word was spelled *myrige*; in Middle English, alternative pronunciations emerged in the different dialect areas—*mury* (West Midlands), *miry* (East Midlands), *mery* (East Anglia and the South-East). In London, because of immigration, all of these pronunciations were available; Chaucer made use of this variation in rhyme: *merye* appears at GP 208 where it rhymes with *berye*; at GP 802, it is spelled *mury* in order to rhyme with *Canterbury*; and at *Merchant's Tale* 2326, it is *mirye*, to rhyme with *pirie* ["pear tree."]

Vocabulary

The variety that we have seen in Chaucer's dialect is also found in his vocabulary. The Middle English wordstock (or "lexicon") was made up of words from various sources. Core items, including grammatical words like conjunctions (*and*, *but*) and pronouns (*I*, *you*, *him*), were inherited from the Old English language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons. During the Middle English period, English was heavily influenced by the French spoken by the aristocratic Norman invaders. Because French was also the language of courtly literature and fashionable manners, much of the vocabulary of polite discourse and behavior was drawn from French: for example, *curteis*, *debonair*, *gentil*, *noble*. Latin was another important source, especially in the area of religious writing, as Latin was the language of the Church and the Bible—hence words like *scripture* and *monasterie*. Middle English also included a number of words borrowed from the Old Norse language spoken by the Vikings who invaded Britain during the Anglo-Saxon period, although, since the Viking settlements were in the North and East Midlands, Norse words were more prominent in the dialects of those regions than in London English. The structural similarities between English and Norse (both are Germanic languages) combined with the tendency for Vikings to settle among and intermarry with Anglo-Saxons promoted borrowing of more everyday words from Old Norse; *egg*, *husband*, *window*, *take*, *leg* give a flavor.

Grammar

Like other modern Germanic languages, Old English was a highly synthetic language; this means that it relied heavily upon special endings to indicate the relationships between words in a sentence. By comparison, Modern English makes comparatively little use of such inflexions, beyond the -'s ending to mark possession and the -s ending to indicate when a noun is plural. By the later Middle English period in which Chaucer wrote, many of the grammatical inflexions that characterized the Old English period had already fallen out of use. The only noun endings that

survive into Chaucer's dialect are the -(e)s ending that indicates possession and the -(e)s ending that is added to a noun to signal when it is plural. There are, however, a handful of nouns that preserve an alternative Old English -n plural ending (found today in *ox–oxen*)—for example, *toon* (toes) and *shoon* (shoes)—but these often appear alongside equivalents with the much more frequent -s. One further relic of the Old English inflexional system is preserved in certain set phrases, where an -e ending appears on nouns following prepositions (indicating the "dative" case): for example, *in toune*, *on honde*.

The decay of the Old English inflexional system also affected Middle English adjectives, although in Chaucer's usage an -e ending continued to be added to adjectives when they modified a plural noun: for example, *olde men*. When preceded by a determiner—such as the definite article *the* or the demonstratives *this* or *that*—singular monosyllabic adjectives also took an -e ending: *the olde man*. These distinctions were rather old fashioned by the late fourteenth century and had probably ceased to be a part of the spoken language. For Chaucer, they were a useful metrical device because they provided an unstressed syllable between two stressed syllables.

Pronouns

The Middle English pronoun system is similar to that of Modern English; it differed from that of Old English in the replacement of the earlier third person plural pronouns with ones borrowed from Old Norse—the ancestor of Modern English *they*, *their*, *them*—which were adopted as replacements for the Old English equivalents *hie/hi*, *hira*, *him*, which were easily confusable with other pronouns. As with other words borrowed from Old Norse, the third person plural pronouns were adopted earliest in the Northern and East Midland dialects, only filtering down into London usage in the fourteenth century. Chaucer's pronoun system shows a mixed paradigm; he used the Old Norse form for the nominative pronoun *they* but Old English derived *hir/her* and *hem*. The only appearances of *their* and *them* in Chaucer's works are in the *Reeve's Tale*, where they form part of the Northern dialect spoken by the two Cambridge students, Aleyn and John, demonstrating that at this time they were still perceived to be Northernisms.

Among the differences between the Middle English pronoun system and that of Modern English is the continued use of the Old English neuter possessive pronoun *his* (its). This can cause some confusion when reading Chaucer's works, since it is not always clear whether we should translate *his* as *his* or *its*. This uncertainty was removed in the sixteenth century with the introduction of the *its* pronoun—formed by adding the genitive -s ending to the neuter nominative pronoun *it*.

A more major difference between Middle and Modern English concerns the second person pronouns. Middle English had a singular pronoun *thou*, alongside a plural form *ye*; standard Modern English, by contrast, uses just one form for both singular and plural: *you*. The singular and plural pronouns were inherited from Old English, but their use changed during the Middle English period under the influence of French usage. In Modern French, as with many other languages, it is possible to address a singular individual using either the singular *tu* or the plural *vous* pronouns. The choice between the two pronouns reflects the relationship between the speaker and the addressee—in the most basic sense, *tu* is used between equals or by a superior to

a junior; *vous* is used to indicate respect and formality by a junior to a superior or between strangers. In the Middle English period, the prestige of French aristocratic speech and manners led to the introduction of a similar system in English. As a consequence, it is usual to find a courtly man or woman in Chaucer's works addressing another using the plural pronoun *ye*, since this was the pronoun of respect. These distinctions are not fixed, however, and the switch between *ye* and *thou* can often be revealing about changes in a speaker's attitude. For example, when Nicholas makes his first advances to Alison in the *Miller's Tale*, he addresses her using the intimate pronoun *thee*: "For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille" (MilT 3278). Alison responds using the same pronoun, although she rejects his advances. But, when this attempt to repel him fails, she switches to the plural *youre* pronoun as part of her appeal to the propriety of courtly manners—"youre curteisye":

And seyde, "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!
Why, lat be!" quod she, "Lat be, Nicholas,
Or I wol crie 'out, harrow' and 'allas'!
Do wey youre handes, for youre curteisye!"
(3284-87)

This example warns us not to treat the distinction between *ye* and *thou* as one determined purely by fixed criteria of rank or gender; instead, the choice of pronoun can be an important index of the relations between speakers, providing insights into the shifting emotional intensity of an interaction.

Style and Register

We have seen that Chaucer's Middle English was a language of variety and flux, with words and pronunciations derived from different languages and dialects. The result of this is a language with many alternative ways of expressing the same concept. But since no two words can have precisely the same meaning, or be used in precisely the same contexts, this variety was extremely useful for the poet of the *Canterbury Tales*. One of the innovations of Chaucer's story-collection is that it includes lowly peasant characters—a Miller, a Reeve, a Cook—rubbing shoulders with aristocratic and noble characters like the Knight and Monk. To give voices to this social and educational range required Chaucer to experiment in the construction of a range of styles.

Given their association with social and educational elevation, French and Latin words in Chaucer's vocabulary tended to occupy a higher register than Germanic words inherited from Old English and Old Norse. This basic stylistic contrast between French/Latin words and Old English/Old Norse equivalents can still be felt today in the different status of pairs such as *felicity/happiness*, *commence/begin*, *verity/truth*. In the *Canterbury Tales*, words borrowed from French and Latin are more commonly found in the speech of the socially-elevated characters or in the tales dealing with more highbrow matters. The peasant characters, by contrast, tend to use words derived from Old English and Old Norse.

An interesting stylistic challenge is presented by the character of Harry Bailly, a *hostiler* (innkeeper), who, as the master of ceremonies, must be able to walk a tricky social tightrope. In order to preserve harmony in this diverse social mix, Harry Bailly needs to be able to address the

more socially elevated pilgrims with appropriate decorum, while also maintaining camaraderie among the lower classes. In his address to the Prioress, we see Harry Bailly in his most flattering mode (ShipT 447-51); he speaks to her using the terms of polite courtly discourse and couches his request in the most indirect and circumlocutionary manner, finally asking her: "wol ye vouche sauf" ["agree."] By contrast, the brusque manner with which he cuts off the hapless pilgrim Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* employs none of these niceties. Instead, Harry speaks "pleinly," bluntly informing him that "Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord" (Th 930).

This ability to switch between different styles is also a characteristic of the tales themselves. We see it in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, where her references to her private parts shift between the coyly euphemistic (*nether purs*), jokily learned (*quoniam*), and crudely direct (*queynte*). Similar stylistic switching appears in the *Merchant's Tale*, where the narrator begins by describing the sexual act between May and Damian in a bluntly physical manner:

Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;
I kan nat glose, I am a rude man—
And sodeynly anon this Damyan
Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng.
(MerT 2350-53)

But then, just a few lines later, the same act is described in blushingly coy terms, in an effort not to speak "uncurteisly":

And saugh that Damyan his wyf had dressed
In swich manere it may nat been expressed,
But if I wolde speke uncurteisly;
(2361-63)

Closely linked to a sensitivity to stylistic register is Chaucer's understanding of the concept of propriety: the importance of using the correct term to describe something. Just as today, different professions have their own jargons, so in Chaucer's day there was an understanding of the concept of *termes*. Chaucer refers to the terms of philosophy, physik (medicine), law, and even love—mastery of these terms was an important outward guarantee of a person's status as a member of the gentle class. Muddling your terms, or mispronouncing them, was a clear indication of someone with failed pretensions to gentility. We can see this in action when Harry Bailly, who admits that he "kan nat speke in terme" (PardT 311) responds to the *Physician's Tale* by saying that he was so grieved that it almost gave him a *cardynacle* (313). The word he is looking for here is properly *cardiacle*, a condition of palpitations (related to our modern word *cardiac*); Harry Bailly, with only the most rudimentary knowledge of medical terminology, has confused it with the unrelated word *cardinal*.

As well as being a way of distinguishing a "gentle man" from a "knave," technical terms were an effective means of pretending to knowledge as part of a deception. We see this in the way that the phony alchemist in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* hoodwinks his victims using terms that are "so clergial [learned] and so queynte [abstruse]" (CYT 752). Latin words and phrases can be

used similarly, as we see in the way the Summoner parrots a handful of Latin terms that he has learned from a papal decree, without any understanding of their meaning (GP 637-43).

Sample Passage

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So Priketh hem Nature in hir corages),
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
(GP 1-18)

The opening of the General Prologue is a good example of Chaucer forging a high register intended to evoke a sense of gravity appropriate to the opening of the work. As we might expect for a passage written in high style, these lines contain a number of words of French or Latin origin, adding to the sense of stylistic elevation: *perced*, *licour*, *engendred*, *corages*, *pilgrimages*. But the choice of words is not driven exclusively by etymological factors; after all, Chaucer and his readers did not have access to modern dictionaries. In the case of a word like *corage*, the elevation derives in large part from the word's usage. This word may be translated as "heart" and so is, to some extent at least, synonymous with the word *herte*. Since *corage* is of French extraction, while *herte* derives from Old English *heorte*, the distinction between the two would appear to be one of style and register. But, while there are instances of both *herte* and *corage* that could be accurately rendered by the modern English word *heart*, there are other more subtle semantic distinctions to be made. The word *corage* was never used to refer to the bodily organ; it is most commonly employed in the abstract sense of the heart as the seat of the emotions—the place where affections, attitudes, and desires are formed. So in the *Knight's Tale*, Palamon cries as if he "stongen were unto the herte" rather than "unto the corage"—since the reference is to the physical organ itself. By contrast, Chaucer the pilgrim, ready to set out on his pilgrimage, describes himself as being "with ful devout corage"; here, the reference is to his emotional and spiritual disposition. This example shows us that words borrowed from French during this period tend to denote more abstract ideas, whereas English words cover the physical, down-to-earth concepts. Subtle distinctions in meaning and usage like these remind us that we need to be careful not to simply assume that two words are synonymous; this is especially important when

reading Chaucer in a student edition where words are often given one-word glosses, meaning that such nuances of meaning are often elided. Another distinction between *corage* and its modern equivalent *courage* concerns its pronunciation; here, the meter shows us that Chaucer and his audience would have sounded the word with stress on the second syllable rather than the first, thereby preserving the French pronunciation more closely.

It is not just the vocabulary that evokes this sense of dignity and grandeur; also important is the syntactic structure; notice how the punctuation that has been added by the editor conceives of the entire eighteen lines as a single sentence. Within this single sentence are numerous clauses linked together in complex ways. While part of this sentence employs a simple paratactic structure—in which a clause is linked to the following by a coordinating conjunction such as *and*—Chaucer embeds these clauses within a more complex series of subordinate clauses—using the subordinating conjunctions *whan that* or *whan*. The result of this is to postpone the main clause until line twelve: "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages."

The passage also includes instances of some of the grammatical features we have observed. In the phrase "the yonge sonne" in line seven, we have an example of the -e added to a singular adjective following a definite article. In line nine, "And smale foweles maken melodye," we have an instance of the -e ending added to the adjective *smal* to make it agree with the plural noun that it is modifying. The plural pronouns *they* and *hem* provide examples of the mixed system of Old Norse and Old English pronouns used by Chaucer, while the neuter possessive pronoun *his* appears on several occasions. Because this pronoun was identical with the masculine possessive pronoun, it is not always possible to determine where Chaucer intended a personification. In line five, for instance, is Chaucer personifying Zephirus, the west wind, or should we translate *his* as *its*? The capitalization of the initial letter of the name Zephirus might encourage us to read this as a personification, but we need to remember that details such as capital letters and punctuation are modern practices imposed by editors and so do not necessarily reflect Chaucer's intentions.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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Davis, N. "Chaucer and Fourteenth-Century English." In *Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by Derek Brewer. Cambridge: 1974, 58-84.

Donaldson, E. Talbot. "Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale." In *Speaking of Chaucer*. London: 1970, 13-29.

Horobin, Simon. *How English Became English: A Short History of a Global Language*. Oxford: 2016.

Horobin, Simon. *Chaucer's Language*, 2nd edition. Basingstoke: 2012.

Online Resources:

The Middle English Compendium: a free online resource that includes a fully searchable *Middle English Dictionary*, Hyperbibliography (including bibliographical references for all the texts used in the dictionary) and an extensive corpus of electronic texts (including the works of Chaucer): http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mec/index.html

The Middle English Glossarial Database: a searchable collection of the works of Chaucer and John Gower: http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/tools/

Larry Benson's Chaucer Homepage: a useful collection of materials relating to Chaucer's language, including a complete glossary: http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/