THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODES 126 - 130

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EPISODE 126: A NEW TURN OF PHRASE

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 126: A New Turn of Phrase. In this episode, we're going to turn our attention back to Geoffrey Chaucer as we explore the middle part of his career leading up to the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer was a prolific writer, but he also continued to be a civil servant, so he had to balance his literary career with his actual day job. His writings during this period also reveal several new developments that were taking place within the English language, specifically within the grammar and syntax of the language. As we'll see, many new grammatical phrases were coming into existence in the late 1300s, and Chaucer's writings reflect those changes. That's part of reason why his poetry seems so accessible to modern readers. So this time, we'll examine the man who is sometimes called the 'Father of English literature,' and we'll see how that literature anticipated the transition from Middle English to Modern English.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, we're going to turn our attention back to Geoffrey Chaucer. He is probably the most well-known English writer before the time of Shakespeare, and for many people, he may be the only English writer they know from this earlier period. There is no doubt that Chaucer was an incredibly gifted poet and writer, but there's also another reason why so many people still read the Canterbury Tales. It's because the language is accessible to modern readers. It isn't Modern English, but it's close enough that we can read it with little more than a glossary of the forgotten words in the margin.

Chaucer wrote in a London dialect of Middle English, and that dialect would soon evolve into the standard form of Modern English. So his language is much closer to Modern English than some of the other important poems of this period. Had he written in a northern dialect or a far southwestern dialect, his legacy probably would not have been the same.

His language is also accessible to us because his grammar and syntax was starting to resemble that of Modern English. The English language as a whole was changing, and people were not only using a lot of new words, they were also putting those words together in new ways. In a sense, English was becoming more 'wordy.' It was starting to use more words to express ideas.

In Old English, most of the grammatical information in a sentence was conveyed with those various inflectional endings that were attached to the end of words. Those endings did most of the work, and they tended to keep the language short and efficient, but when most of those endings eroded and disappeared, speakers had to come up with new ways express all of that lost information. As we've seen before, they did that in part by relying on a fixed word order – subject first, then the verb, then the object. That way, they didn't need specific word endings to tell them which noun was the subject and which was the object. The position of the words in the sentence told them that.

But a fixed word order only solved part of the problem. Speakers had to find other ways to convey the rest of the information that was lost when those endings disappeared. They did that in part by using more words to express those same ideas. English started to rely more and more on grammatical phrases – noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and verb phrases. It took a lot of new words and phases to replace those endings. Linguists would say that English became more periphrastic. That's a fancy way of saying it was using phrases to express ideas that were previously represented with a single word or a small number of words. And that's what I mean when I say the language was becoming more 'wordy.'

These changes took place throughout the 1200s and 1300s, and by the end of that period, we had a grammar that was starting to resemble that of Modern English. And the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer capture and reflect the state of the language at that time, especially the language of London that was about to become standard English. So this time, I want to explore how Chaucer's writings in the middle part of his career reflect some of those changes.

Now the last time we looked at Chaucer's career in any detail, it was around the time of his first major poem called the Book of the Duchess. You might remember that the poem was written in the early 1370s to commemorate the death of John of Gaunt's wife who was the Duchess Blanche. We've come across John of Gaunt a lot during this period because he was a central figure in the English government. He was the leading noble because everyone else in the royal family was either too old, too young or too sick to run the government. He had also inherited the massive Lancastrian lands in the north of England through Blanche and her deceased father. So he was rich and powerful. The peasants hated him, but he was a strong advocate for the English language, and he was close to Geoffrey Chaucer.

I noted in a prior episode that Chaucer's wife Phillipa and her sister Kathryn both worked in Gaunt's household, and the sister Kathryn began an affair with Gaunt shortly after Blanche died. The affair was open and well-known, despite the fact that Gaunt entered into another political marriage a short time later. When Gaunt's second wife died several years later, he actually married Kathryn. So these two sisters – Phillipa and Kathryn – provided a direct connection between Geoffrey Chaucer and John of Gaunt. The two men eventually became brothers-in-law through that connection.

That personal connection allowed Chaucer to maintain a good government job throughout most of his career. It's often said that Gaunt was Chaucer's patron, but in reality, there's no evidence that Chaucer was actually paid for his writings. Instead, he was given lucrative government jobs which allowed him to support himself and his family, and he wrote in his spare time.

Even though he wrote in English, Chaucer's early poetry shows a heavy French influence, which is not surprising given that French was the dominant literary language at the time. But in the early 1370s, Chaucer was sent on a diplomatic mission to Italy, and after that, his influences shifted from French to Italian.

As we've seen before, Chaucer was a diplomat who was often sent on diplomatic missions. In the year 1372, he was sent on a well-recorded mission to Italy. He visited Florence, Pisa and Genoa. The Genoese merchants were trying to establish a trading base in England, and Chaucer was sent to work out a financial arrangement with them. He also met with the Florence banking families because the elderly King Edward was still alive, and he wanted to borrow money from them. Most scholars think Chaucer was selected for the mission because he spoke some Italian, and he had a good command of the language.

After he returned from that mission, Chaucer's writings started to show a noticeable Italian influence. Dante had composed his Divine Comedy earlier in the century. It was the first major work of literature to be composed in Italian rather than the traditional Latin. And it proved that great literary works could be composed in a local vernacular. It is widely believed that Dante's success served as an example for Chaucer who ultimately decided to compose his writings in his own native vernacular – English.

During the time of Chaucer's visit to Italy, the two leading Italian writers were Francesco Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio. Chaucer was exposed to their writings, and he probably obtained copies of their works for his own personal book collection. As we'll see, from this point forward, Chaucer routinely re-worked those Italian poems into his own English versions. He also used the meter and rhyme scheme of those earlier poems. Two years after that initial visit to Italy, Chaucer was sent on a second mission there, and that initial infatuation with Italian poetry was reinforced.

Around the same time as that second visit to Italy, Chaucer was appointed as Controller of the Customs and Subsidies at the port of London. The Controller was the person in charge of collecting the taxes on wool, leather and other products that were shipped out of the port. It was a big responsibility, and it required very detailed records. If the numbers came up short, he could be fired or even imprisoned for embezzlement. Fortunately, it appears that Chaucer was a good record keeper, and he kept that position for many years throughout this middle part of his career.

Despite his job as the head of the customs at the port, he continued to serve as a diplomat, and in the year 1378, he was once again sent on a diplomatic mission to the north of Italy. He was looking to secure allies in England's on-going war with France. Shortly after returning from that trip, Chaucer completed his next great poem called the House of Fame. It's a dream poem in which he makes a journey to a massive building in the sky called the House of Fame. The goddess named Fame lives there, and she hands out fame and infamy to the many people who are gathered there. Like many of Chaucer's poems, it was never finished, but it is a good example of his poetry during this period.

In the poem, Chaucer serves as the narrator. He falls asleep, and while sleeping, he has a dream vision. He awakes from the dream in a temple made of glass and soon realizes that he is in the Temple of Venus. On a wall, he finds writings and portraits that tell the mythological story of Aeneas – the Trojan hero who survived the fall of Troy and traveled to Italy to become the first hero of Rome.

In mythology, Aeneas is the son of Venus, so that may account for the story on the wall. As Chaucer recounts the story of Aenas, he states that Aeneas's wife "Bad hym to flee the Grekes host" – she 'pleaded to him to flee the Greeks' host.'   But on his journey to Italy, the goddess Juno sent a fierce storm against the Trojan ships because she hated the Trojans. The passage identifies her as "Jupiteres wif" – 'Jupiter's wife.'

Now those two passages contain very traditional possessives – the "Grekes host" (the Greeks' host) and "Jupiteres wif" (Jupiter's wife). That's the way the Anglo-Saxons usually handled possessives, and that's the way we often do it today. Today, we use ['s], but the apostrophe is a more recent innovation. Chaucer simply used [-es] to mark the possessive. And that [-es] is a lingering inflectional ending that survived from similar endings used in Old English.

But shortly after Chaucer refers to the 'Greek's host' and 'Jupiter's wife,' he includes a passage in which Venus prays to Jupiter to save Aeneas and the Trojan ships. Venus prays "to save and kepe that navye of the Troian Eneas" – 'to save and keep the navy of the Trojan Aeneas.'

So in this passage, we see the other way to show possession in English. Chaucer refers to the 'navy of the Trojan Aeneas.' He uses the word *of* as part of a prepositional phrase. He could have said 'the Trojan Aeneas's navy' using the ['s] ending, but he chose to use 'the navy of Aeneas' instead. This reflects a general trend within Middle English to use *of* rather than the more traditional ['s] ending. So whereas an Anglo-Saxon would have referred to the 'king's law' with two words, a Middle English speaker would have been more likely to refer to the 'law of the king' with four words. So twice as many words, but the same general idea. Again, this was part of that general trend away from inflectional endings toward longer phrases – especially prepositional phrases.

Now the Anglo-Saxons did sometimes use the word *of* to show possession like we do today, but it was very rare. In late Old English, it was used less than 1% of the time. By the mid-1200s, it was used about one-third of the time versus the ['s] ending which was used the other two-thirds. Then, by the early 1300s, the use of the word *of* spiked. It's been estimated that it was used about 85% of the time which was a massive jump in use. The traditional ['s] ending was only being used about 15% of the time. By the way, those statistics come from Hans Frede Nielsen's book titled "From Dialect to Standard English 1154-1776" (p. 78-79).

So for some reason, Middle English speakers fully embraced the idea of showing possession by using *of* and a prepositional phrase. 'The population of the world' rather than 'the world's population.' 'The color of the house' rather than 'the house's color.' It isn't entirely clear why this shift occurred so rapidly, but it appears to be related to the overall increase in the use of prepositional phrases at the time. Another theory is that it reflects the influence of French during this period. French shows possession with a prepositional phrase using *de*, which is the French equivalent of *of*. So when we use *of* to show possession, it mirrors the way French does it. That doesn't necessarily mean that French caused the change within English, but it may have encouraged it and reinforced it.

Interestingly, the ['s] ending made a comeback in early Modern English. Today, we use a mixture of both the ['s] ending and the *of* phrase. We actually saw an example of that change in the last episode about Wycliffe's Bible. Wycliffe has used the phrase 'the keeper of my brother' in his Middle English Bible. So he used a prepositional phrase with *of*, which as we now know was the common way to do it in Middle English. But in the King James Version in the early 1600s, the phrase was changed from 'keeper of my brother' to 'my brother's keeper.' So the *of* was dropped in favor of the ['s.] And again, that was part of the comeback of that older way to show possession.

Now as we know, Old English word order was very loose and flexible. The word order didn't matter as much because the inflectional endings did so much of the work. So during that time, the ['s] ending to show possession could be used on either side of the noun. You could refer to the 'king's law' or the 'law king's.' In fact, it was about 50/50 in Old English. But in the Middle English period, the ['s] ending became fixed before the noun and the *of* prepositional phrase became fixed after the noun. And that gave us the modern distinction between the 'king's law' and the 'law of the king.'

So again, these changes reveal the three basic grammatical themes of this period – a more fixed word order, the decline of inflectional endings, and the increased use of phrases to replace those lost endings.

Modern English was taking shape, but it still had a way to go. Even in the time of Chaucer, speakers hadn't figured out how to handle a situation where two possessives were combined. For example, England had a king, and the king had a son. So how do we combine those elements into a single phrase to refer to that son in reference to the king and in reference to the country he ruled. Today, we can refer to the 'son of the King of England.' So we can use *of* twice. Or we can refer to the 'King of England's son' with an ['s]. But in either case, we treat the 'King of England' as a collective unit. Again, 'son of the King of England' or 'the King of England's son.' Well, Middle English hadn't evolved to that point yet. It was still thought that the word with the ['s] ending should come immediately before the noun it was describing. So you referred to the 'king's son' even when the king was the 'King of England.' So you said 'the King's son of England' rather then the 'King of England's son.' And you said the 'Duke's army of Normandy' rather then the 'Duke of Normandy's army.' And Chaucer even reflects this common syntax a few lines later in this particular poem when he refers to the daughter of the King of Thrace. He includes the line "That kynges doghtre was of Trace" – 'that was the king's daughter of Thrace.' Now today, we would say 'the king of Thrace's daughter.' We would treat 'king of Thrace' as a collective noun and just put the ['s] at the end of that phrase.

Well, apparently Chaucer also realized that it made more sense to treat the entire phrase 'king of Thrace' as a collective noun because a little later in the poem, he changed the syntax and did just that. He phrased it just like we do today. He referred to the classical Roman poet Ovid who had written about Venus – the goddess of love. He wrote of Ovid "that hath ysowen wonder wide the grete god of Loves name," or in Modern English, he "who has wondrously spread the great god of Love's name." So here, he doesn't say the 'god's name of love' as would have normally been the case at the time. Instead, he treats 'god of Love' as a collective noun and refers to the 'god of

Love's name' just like we would today. Many scholars actually consider this to be the first known example of an English writer using that type of modern phrasing – putting the 's' ending on the noun phrase as a whole. So this example shows how Modern English syntax or word order was starting to emerge during this period. But despite Chaucer's early example, it would take over another century for that type of phrasing to become common within English. Even Shakespeare used the old phrasing from time to time. For example, in Henry IV, Shakespeare refers to 'The Archbishop's Grace of York' rather than the 'Archbishop of York's grace.' So these changes took time to filter through the language.

Now returning to the poem, Chaucer the narrator goes though the story of Aeneas as depicted on the wall of the temple, but he still doesn't know where he is, so he decides to go outside to see if there is anyone who might know. When he walks outside, he sees a massive eagle flying above. The eagle is as bright as the sun. It swoops down and picks up Chaucer and takes him away. This may very well be an allusion to Dante's Divine Comedy. The second part of the Divine Comedy called Purgatorio features an eagle who takes Dante to purgatory.

At any rate, Chaucer says that the eagle had "grymme pawes stronge" (grim paws strong) and "sharpe nayles longe" (sharp nails long) and "clawes starke" (claws stark). So instead of 'strong paws,' he used 'paws strong.' And instead of 'long nails,' he used 'nails long.' And instead of 'stark claws,' he used 'claws stark.' So he routinely put the adjective after the noun. That was another common feature of the language at the time. Once again, French influence may have been a factor. In early Old English, adjectives could occur on either side of the noun they were describing. You can refer to the 'black dog' or the 'dog black.' Again, word order was looser. By the late Old English period, there was a general tendency to put the adjective first, but it was still variable. Then in Middle English, the trend went in the other direction and it became common to put the adjective after the noun. Again, French also tended to do that, so that may have been why English speakers starting doing it. But over time, the trend was once again reversed and went in the other direction. English speakers gradually reverted back to putting the adjective before the noun, and that's generally where we put it today.

Now returning to Chaucer's House of Fame, the poet is whisked away by the eagle. The eagle speaks to Chaucer in a human voice and tells him not to be afraid. He is taking Chaucer to the House of Fame to be amused and entertained. The eagle explains that all words uttered by people ultimately reach the House of Fame in the sky. In the same way that a stone causes ever-widening ripples and waves when it falls into the water, so do the sound waves created by the human voice. They ripple through the sky and ultimately reach the House of Fame. We later find out that when a person's voice reaches the House of Fame, the person who spoke those words actually appears in the House.

Now again, in making this analogy between water and sound waves, the eagle refers to the ripples caused by a stone falling into water. He says that the ripples begin with a small circle, which causes another larger circle, and then another and another, spreading outwards from the source. Chaucer writes, "Every sercle causynge other, Wydder than hymselve was" ('Every circle causing another, wider than itself was'). So Chaucer uses the word *wydder* – or *wide*r – to compare the size of the circles or ripples in the water. That was the traditional Old English way

to compare two things. You used an inflection on the end of the word. So the [-er] ending in a word like *wider* or *longer* or *taller* is ultimately derived from Old English. It's one of those lingering inflections that we still use today.

Of course, we do the same thing when we compare several different things and we want to highlight just one. We put an [-est] ending on the word – *widest*, *longest*, *tallest*. Again, that ending came from Old English. So we have *wide*, *wider* and *widest*. That's a good example of how Old English used a variety of endings to express specific meanings.

But as you probably know, we have a completely different way of expressing the same concepts using a phrase rather than a specific word ending. Instead of putting an [-er] on the end of the adjective, we can put the word *more* in front of it. So instead of *spicier*, we can say that one dish is 'more spicy' than the other. And instead of the [-est] ending, we can use the word *most*. So you might eat the 'spiciest' dish, or the dish that was the 'most spicy.' Now today, most adjectives require one or the other. We would refer to the 'wider' circle, not the 'more wide' circle, but at one time, the two options were more interchangeable.

Old English didn't actually use the words *more* and *most* when comparing things. It did have a similar construction using the Old English words *swiþor* or *bet* instead of *more*, and using the words *swiþost* or *betst* instead of *most*. But again, those types of phrases were very rare. Old English mainly relied on those inflectional endings. It was during the Middle English period that people switched away from the endings and began to use phrases with *more* and *most*.

Again, French may have been an influence here. French grammar also uses a phrase to compare things. It typically uses a form of the word *plus* (P-L-U-S) in the way that we might use *more* or *most*.

Again, within Middle English, the old and new ways were interchangeable at first. You could say 'clearer' the old way or 'more clear' the new way. You could say 'largest' the old way or 'most large' the new way. You could even combine them for added emphasis. You could have a 'more sweeter' dessert or the 'most largest' house.

English has never really adopted a formal rule to distinguish the old way with the endings from the new way with *more* and *most*. Today, the very general rule is that you use the [-er] or [-est] ending with a short one-syllable word – *bigger*, *taller*, *fastest*, *slowest*. If the word is three or more syllables, we typically use *more* or *most* and turn it into a phrase – 'more beautiful,' 'most outrageous.' But two syllable words can be tricky. Some go one way, some go the other, and some can go either way. You could say 'cloudier' or 'more cloudy.' Sometimes, you just have to go with what sounds right. But either way, it is important to note that English has these alternatives today largely thanks to Middle English. Again, Middle English grammar moved away from inflectional endings like [-er] and [-est] in favor of phrases with multiple words.

Now returning to the poem, the eagle takes Chaucer higher and higher in the sky toward the House of Fame. At first, Chaucer sees hills and valleys, then entire cities, then he is so high that

the earth itself appears to be no bigger than a point. So they are now in space. Then the eagle speaks. In Modern English, the passage reads:

Now, said he then, cast up thine eye.
See yonder, lo, the galaxy,
Which men call the Milky Way.

Now in the original Middle English:

"Now," quod he thoo, "cast up thyn ye.
Se yonder, lo, the Galaxie,
Which men clepeth the Milky Wey

Now this is a fascinating passage because it is the first time that the term *Milky Way* appears in an English document. And it is also one of the first times – and perhaps the very first time – that the word *galaxy* was used in an English text. You might be surprised that Chaucer helped to introduce those terms to English. And here's something else that is interesting. The terms *Milky Way* and *galaxy* are actually related in terms of their etymology. *Milky Way* is a partial English translation of the word *galaxy*. The word *galaxy* passed from Greek, to Latin, to French, to English. The connection between *Milky Way* and *galaxy* is a lot more apparent when you realize that the 'lax' part of *galaxy* comes from the same root as *lactose*. When the Greeks observed the night sky, they noticed a light band that stretched across the sky. It was milky white in appearance, so the Greeks called it *galaxias kyklos* – literally the 'milky circle.' Latin speakers then borrowed the term, but they modified it from 'milky circle' to 'milky way.' It was 'via lactea' in Latin. And English speakers simply took that Latin term 'via lactea,' and they did a direct translation into English as *Milky Way*. And again, Geoffrey Chaucer was the first known writer to use that term *Milky Way* in the House of Fame.

Now Chaucer as the narrator of the poem finally reaches the House of Fame. It is built on a mountain of ice. The names of many famous people are engraved on the ice, even though some of the letters have melted away over time. At the top of the mountain is a beautiful structure. Chaucer says that it was larger and more elaborate than he can describe. The building is the House of Fame. It is filled with poets and minstrels and singers and musicians and other people – more than the number of stars in the sky. Many of the people are famous and well-known people from throughout history. Chaucer also encounters the cental figure of the castle – Lady Fame. She grants her favors to the various people in attendance, giving some fame and others infamy and denying others any recognition at all. She does this without regard to fairness or justice or merit. Dispensing fame is a random process. Chaucer says that he has long realized that many people seek fame and notoriety, but he didn't realize how fame was actually acquired until now.

He is then led out of the House of Fame to another remarkable structure, again indescribably large, made of cage-like material, spinning around, with a sound emanating from the building that resembled the whisking sound of a flying stone launched by a siege engine. The roof has thousands of holes to let out the sounds coming from inside. The house is full of rumors and stories – some true and some complete lies.

The eagle reappears and takes Chaucer inside where he sees more people than he knew possibly existed. They are all whispering in each other's ears, spreading news and gossip and rumors – both true and false. These utterings rise toward the windows and escape the building. Chaucer sees a lie and truth meet each other at a window. Each wants to escape before the other, but they agree to exit together, thereby merging into one and flying out as a single tiding.

Suddenly Chaucer hears a great noise in the corner of the hall. Everyone inside rushes to see what is happening, crawling over each other to get a better view. At that point, Chaucer sees a man he has no business seeing, a man who commands great respect, aaaaaaand . . . the end. That's where Chaucer ends the poem.

It's isn't clear if he did that on purpose or if he just never finished it. Some scholars have suggested that the man he saw was Chaucer himself – the narrator. But this is actually the way many of Chaucer's poems from this period end. It appears that he never got around to finishing most of his poetry, and that includes the Canterbury Tales.

Now shortly after completing this particular poem called the House of Fame, Chaucer went to work on his next major work – which became known as the Parliament of Fowls. This next poem is about three male eagles who are trying to win the affection of a female eagle before a parliament or collection of lesser birds. It continued Chaucer's infatuation with Italian poetry. It is composed in a specific poetic meter or rhyming pattern called rime royal which was famously used by the Italian poet Boccaccio. Like the beginning of the House of Fame, this next poem is also set in the Temple of Venus, and Chaucer pulls much of his description of that temple directly from one of Boccaccio's poems called 'Il Teseida.'

Ultimately, Parliament of Fowls is a love poem, and it is probably most notable to us today because it was set on Valentine's Day. That was the day when the birds gathered to select their mates. Well, up until this poem, St. Valentine's Day was a relatively minor religious holiday – one of many that celebrated the lives of various saints. But in Parliament of Fowls, it was given a specific association with courtly romance and attempts to win the affections of others. And in fact, this poem contains the very first reference to Valentine's Day in the English language. Now, in the poem, Chaucer seems to suggest that there was an existing tradition that associated the day with romance, but there is no reference to that connection in any surviving document before this poem. So as a result, Geoffrey Chaucer is generally credited with popularizing the holiday as we know it today – as the day when we celebrate love and romance. So this relatively obscure poem by Geoffrey Chaucer was destined to have a significant impact on our culture for centuries to come.

Now shortly after completing the Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer began work on his next major poem called Troilus and Criseyde. This is widely considered to be his greatest work outside of the Canterbury Tales, and many scholars actually consider it to be superior to the Canterbury Tales even though it isn't as widely known. One of the things it has going for it is the fact that it was actually completed. Unlike many of his other poems, Chaucer finished this one with a proper ending. So it is a complete work. It's also quite long – much longer that the House of Fame and Parliament of Fowls. Some scholars have even called it the first English novel.

The poem continues to reflect Chaucer's Italian influences during this period. The story of Troilus and Criseyde had been told several times over the prior centuries, but Chaucer's version is really a re-working of the version told by Boccaccio in his earlier poem called 'Il Filostrato.' In fact, in certain places, Chaucer follows Boccaccio's version almost line by line – suggesting that he was working from a copy which he had in his possession. But Chaucer ultimately departs from the earlier versions and ends up telling his own version of the story in the end. The story itself comes from the Greek legends about the Trojan War, and is based around Troilus who was a minor character in The Illiad. His love affair with Criseyde was a separate story that developed in the Middle Ages, and Chaucer gives us the definitive version of the story in English even though Shakespeare also produced a version of the story a couple of centuries later.

Now I don't have time in this episode to take you though the whole poem, but I do want to use the poem to illustrate an interesting development in the language, and that's the evolution of the Modern English verb phrase.

As we've seen, English speakers were shifting away from a grammar and syntax that relied on word endings, and they were moving toward a grammar that relied more and more on phrases. And we see that trend in the way English handled verbs during this period. Basic Old English statements like 'I speak' and 'I spoke' evolved into more expansive phrases like 'I am speaking,' and 'I have spoken,' and 'I have been speaking.' These new types of verb phrases contributed to subtlety and nuance and allowed for different shades of meaning. They also allowed speakers to express more subtle notions of time and action.

So let's take a quick look at Troilus and Criseyde and see how Chaucer used these types of phrases. The poem is divided into five books or chapters, and I'm mostly going to focus on the first book here. It begins with a short introduction warning the reader of the sorrow to come. Here's the passage in Modern English:

The double sorrow of Troilus to tell,
That was the son of Priam, king of Troy,
Of his adventures when he fell in love
From woe to well-being, and back again from joy,

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
In lovynge how his aventures fellen
fro wo to wele, and after out of ioie,

So we' re introduced to Troilus who was the son of the Trojan king Priam. Notice again the way the prepositional phrase 'of Troy' is rendered in the original Middle English version. It's rendered the old way that I described earlier. Rather than 'King Priam of Troy's son,' it appears as 'King Priam's son of Troy.' And we're told that this is story of Troilus falling in love and the sorrow of a love lost.

We're then told that the story takes place during the siege of Troy by the Greeks during the Trojan War. A soothsayer named Calchas foresees that the Greeks will capture and destroy the city of Troy, so in order to save himself, he becomes a traitor. He flees Troy and goes over to the Greeks who happily accept him since he can provide inside information about the Trojans. But in fleeing Troy, he leaves behind his daughter Criseyde.

Criseyde is described as the most beautiful woman in Troy, but since she is the daughter of a traitor, she is ridiculed and hated by her fellow Trojans. She is unmarried and a widow with no one to turn to for support. So she goes to Hector, who is the eldest son of the Trojan king Priam, and she pleads for mercy. Hector feels sorry for her, and he guarantees her protection. He says that she can continue to live in Troy, and no one will punish her for her father's treachery.

She thanks him and returns to her home. Chaucer then includes the following passage – first in Modern English:

And in her house she abided with such servants
as her high honor entitled her to hold;
And while she was dwelling in that city
she kept her estate, and by both young and old,
she was beloved, and men spoke well of her.

Now the original Middle English version:

And in hire hous she abood with swich meyne
As til hire honour nede was to holde;
And whil she was dwellynge in that cite
Kepte hir estat, and both of yonge and olde
ful wel biloued, and wel men of hir tolde.

Now this passage shows a very interesting grammatical development which was still pretty rare at the time. Chaucer wrote the line "And whil she was dwellynge in that cite" ('And while she was dwelling in that city'). Now that seems very normal to us today, but the verb phrase 'was dwelling' was relatively new at the time.

This is what modern linguists call the progressive tense. It's formed when we combine a version of the verb 'to be' with the main verb plus an [-ing] ending. You can have a present progressive or a past progressive depending on what form of **be** you use. So 'He is singing" or 'I am running' is the present progressive. And 'She was dancing" or "We were playing" is the past progressive. But either way, this type of verb phrase allows us to express that an action was continuous or on-going. If I say, "The horse jumped the fence," that implies that he jumped it one time. But if I say, "The horse was jumping the fence," that indicates that the horse did it over and over again. Modern English allows us to use this type of phrase to make that distinction clear. Otherwise, I would have to be more specific. I would have to say something like "The horse jumped the fence several times." But when I use the phrase 'was jumping,' that conveys that idea by itself. I don't have to add any other information. So when Chaucer says that Criseyde 'was dwelling' in Troy,

we know that was an on-going process that continued for some time. And that type of progressive verb phrase didn't really become common until the Middle English period.

Now English scholars will point out that Old English did have a similar construction, but it was very, very rare in Old English. And it may have represented a type of informal slang that didn't usually appear in formal writing. However, by the time we get to Middle English – when people were using fewer inflections and more phrases – we can clearly identify this type of progressive verb phrase.

So by this point, we have our modern progressive verb phrase. The key elements were a form of the verb 'to be' plus the main verb plus [ing] – 'am singing' – 'was dwelling.' When you put those three elements together, you could now express a continuous action, and Chaucer used that type of verb phrase here at the beginning of Troilus and Criseyde.

So as we return the poem, we are introduced to Troilus. He attends a Trojan religious festival with many of the people of Troy. Criseyde is also there. Several of his knights hit on ladies in attendance. Troilus mocks them and mocks lovers in general, but the God of Love strikes Troilus in retaliation, and he immediately falls head over heels in love when he sees Criseyde. He is immediately racked with pain and longing.

We're told that Troilus soon left the Temple where he saw Criseyde, and he regretted how he had mocked the other knights – "repentinge him that he hadde ever y-japed" ('repenting him that he had ever japed'). *Japed* meant 'mocked or made fun of.' So he regretted that he had mocked or made fun of the others. Later, we' re told that Troilus experienced further woe when he realized that Criseyde may already love someone else and "that never of him she wolde have taken hede" ('that never of him she would have taken heed') – so she would never be interested in him.

Now the two lines I just read to you show another important grammatical development. In the first line, we have 'that he had ever japed – or mocked.' Then we have the line 'never she would have taken heed.' So 'had japed or mocked' and 'have taken heed.' These types of verb phrases use the word *have* or *had* before the past tense version of the verb, Again, 'had mocked' or 'have taken.' Again, this was a new way to express past tense in Middle English.

It was used to make a subtle distinction in time when talking about things in the past. It allowed speakers to put past events in some type of order. The normal past tense didn't allow that type of subtlety without additional explanation. Let's say that I run into you, and I say "Yesterday I went to the store where I saw Mary." Now that uses the normal past tense. 'I went to the store' where 'I saw Mary.' But does that mean I went to the store and Mary was there at the same time? Or does it mean I went to a store yesterday, and it happened to be the same store where I had seen Mary at some earlier date? Again, "I went to the store where I saw Mary." The timing is vague. Well, with this new type of verb phrase, I can fix that ambiguity. Now I can say, "I went to the store where I had seen Mary.' Now it's clear. The store was the one where I had seen Mary at some earlier time. The verb phrase 'had seen' with the word *had* clears up that confusion.

This type of verb phrase is called the 'perfect tense' by linguists because it expresses an action that has been perfected or completed. Again, it allows us to express order and sequence when talking about the past. It allows us to refer to an action that preceded any given point in the narrative. And in English, it is expressed by putting a version of the word *have* before the verb in past tense. 'I have seen,' 'He has jumped,' 'They had finished.' It's as simple as that, but it wasn't really common in English until the Middle English period.

There's some evidence for these types of verb phrases in Old English, but again they were extremely rare. Old English just used the regular past tense in most cases. But in Middle English, this perfect tense emerged as a standard way of describing actions in the past. Sometimes, speakers would use a version of 'to be' rather than 'to have.' Even Shakespeare used phrases like 'He is come' rather than 'he has come.' But the verb 'to be' was dropped in this particular tense in the 1800s. And today, we just use *have*, *has* or *had*.

So we've looked at two relatively new types of verb phrases. The first was the progressive form using 'to be' plus the main verb plus [-ing]. 'I am speaking.' 'She was dancing.' Then we have the perfect tense using 'to have' plus the verb in past tense. 'I have spoken.' 'She had danced.' Again, both of those became common in Middle English. Chaucer didn't invent them, but he often used them. However, Chaucer is the first known writer do so something very interesting with these two types of verb phrases. He is the first known writer to put them together.

We can put them together by using the verb 'to have,' and then adding the verb 'to be,' and then adding the main verb. That gives us a brand new way of expressing an action. So we have the progressive phrase 'I am speaking' for a continuous action. And we have the perfect tense phrase 'I have spoken' for a recently completed action. When we put them together, we get a new phrase – 'I have been speaking.' We use that for a continuous action that was recently completed. Again, 'I have been speaking.' 'She has been working.' That type of combination isn't really found until the time of Chaucer in the 1380s.

In fact, according to some sources, the first recorded use of this combination was in the Knight's Tale which is the first of the Canterbury Tales. In the story, the Athenian ruler named Theseus encounters several women dressed in black on a road. One of them says to Theseus, "We han ben waitynge al this fourtennyght" ('We have been waiting all this fortnight'). Again, this is certainly one of the first times that combination is found in an English document, and it may indeed be the first time.

This type of phrase shows how the word *have* was being extended well beyond its original meaning of 'possession.' Here, it is simply being used as a grammatical marker to indicate a completed action.

So with these new verb phases in tow, let's return to Troilus and Criseyde. Troilus is now hopelessly in love with Criseyde. He soon admits his love to his uncle Pandarus. Pandarus encourages him to confess his love to Criseyde, and then Pandarus begins work on a plan to unite the two.

Now this character of Pandarus is a central figure in the poem since he acts as a go-between for the two lovers. And his name is the ultimate source of the word *pander* in Modern English. If you *pander* to someone, you indulge them. Perhaps you encourage their worst instincts. Well, the word actually began as a noun. A *pander* was someone like Pandarus who acted as a go-between to facilitate love. It even has a sense as a pimp. Over time, the meaning evolved to refer to someone who encouraged another person's immoral or illicit behavior. And then it evolved into a verb meaning 'to encourage that type of behavior,' and then 'to encourage any of the whims or desires of another person.' So the meaning of this word has evolved over time, but it begins with Pandarus in Troilus and Criseyde.

Now this concludes Book 1 of the story. Book 2 begins with another short introduction – a poem to Clio the Muse of History. Chaucer prays for her help in telling the story and in making it rhyme. He also asks for help in translating part of the story from its original Latin sources.

Now when Chaucer returns to the main narrative of the story, he sets the stage by telling us that the events take place in May when fresh flowers grow and balmy breezes blow over the meadows – and "Whan Phebus doth his brighte bemes sprede" ('When Phoebus does his bright beams spread' or when 'Phoebus does spread his bright beams'). Phoebus was another name for Apollo. And here, Chaucer tells us that he 'does spread' his bright beams. He could have simply said that Phoebus 'spreads' his bright beams, but he uses the phrase 'does spread' instead. This is what some linguists call the 'meaningless do' – or 'empty do.' It's called that because the word *do* isn't really doing anything other than marking the tense. Instead of 'spreads,' you can say 'does spread.' And instead of 'jumped,' you can say 'did jump.' This particular usage has largely disappeared from Modern English outside of poetry or some other situation where the writer is intentionally using an older form of the language, but it is important because is points to a change that was taking place in Middle English. The word *do* was starting to be used as an auxiliary separate and apart from its original meaning.

Now, the history of the word *do* within English is very complicated, and one could write an entire book on its evolution over time. But let me give you a very quick overview. In Old English, it was used in its original sense as a distinct verb meaning 'to perform, or execute or carry out.' So you might 'do' your work, or you might 'do' the laundry. That was the original sense which we still use today. It could also be used as a substitute verb. So we might use it in a sentence like, "I work hard, and you do too.' In that type of sentence, the word *do* is just taking the place of *work* so as not to sound repetitive. Again, this type of 'substitute do' can be found as far back as Old English.

The word *do* also had one other usage in Old English. It could be used to indicate that the subject caused something to occur. Now this seems a bit odd today, but if I said "She did him die," it meant 'She caused him to die.' In Piers Plowman, we have the line "And Gyle dooth hym to go" which literally meant 'And Gyle made him go or ordered him to go.' This use of the word *do* can be found from time to time in Old English, but it really become common in Middle English. However, it eventually died out. It was largely gone by the 1700s. Again, it isn't really clear why the word *do* acquired this particular meaning, but it is worth noting that French uses the verb

faire in a lot of verb phrases, and it means 'to make or to do.' So that French construction may have reinforced the popularity of this usage within English.

At any rate, by the 1200s, the word *do* was being used in another new way. That was the 'meaningless do' that we saw earlier. In this new usage, it no longer had any independent meaning within the sentence. It was simply being used as a grammatical marker – as an auxiliary. Again, this usage also died out over time, but it actually enjoyed a period of popularity in early Modern English around the time of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. And that's why we tend to associate it with an older form of the language today.

Again, the so-called 'meaningless do' was used to indicate the specific tense of the verb without actually changing the verb. So if I have the verb *speak*, I would normally say 'he speaks' or 'She spoke.' I have to alter the verb a little bit to indicate present or past tense. But with 'meaningless do,' the word *do* does all the work. 'He does speak.' "She did speak.' 'They do speak.' We hear this type of phrasing in a poetic sentence like 'The sun doth shine.' Or as Longfellow once wrote, "The flowers she most did love" rather than 'The flowers she loved most.'

So again, this development is important because it shows that *do* was no longer being used in its original sense as a distinct verb. It was just serving as a grammatical marker. It isn't clear why that happened. It may have been a natural evolution from the use of *do* to express causation. So a sentence like 'I did pay him' – meaning 'I caused him to be paid' – may have been interpreted more literally as 'I paid him.' So 'I did pay him' just became another way of saying 'I paid him.' That's one theory. Other scholars point to the fact that the Celtic language of Wales used its word meaning 'do' as an auxiliary in similar way, and that may have been an influence. Another theory suggests that French influence played a role. Maybe it was some combination of all of those theories. At any rate, this type of 'meaningless do' became popular in English for a while, but it gradually disappeared from normal everyday speech.

Then around the time of Chaucer, we see the final developments in the evolution of the word *do*. Around that time, the word *do* started to be used for emphasis. And at first glance, this appears to be almost identical to the 'meaningless do,' but it was being used in a different way to show emphasis. So if your boss accuses you of not finishing your work, you might say 'No, I DID finish my work.' It sounds like the more poetic 'I did finish my work' to express past tense, but you're not using the word *did* poetically. You're using it to emphasize the fact that you DID finish your work. Since the two versions are written down the same way, it isn't always clear how a writer in an old text was using the word. Some scholars see evidence of this so-called 'emphatic do' in Piers Plowman in the 1370s, but other scholars suggest that it isn't clearly evident in English until the 1600s.

So by the time of Chaucer, we have *do* in its original sense as a primary verb as in 'I do my homework every day.' And we have it as a substitute verb as in 'Bob wears a tie to work everyday, and so do I.' And it may have also been used for emphasis during that period as in 'Despite the pain, I DO want to finish the race." And then there was the 'meaningless do' where it was just used to mark the tense of the main verb. 'The wind does blow.' 'The sun did shine.'

And that was the way Chaucer used it in that phrase which launched this discussion. He wrote, 'Phoebus does his bright beams spread.'

Well, around this same time, that purely grammatical use of *do* as an auxiliary was extended to two new uses which still exist today. First, it started to be used to form questions. Previously, people just reversed the subject and the verb. So a sentence like 'You see the dog' became 'See you the dog?' But around the time of Chaucer, people started to extend the use of *do* as a grammatical marker, and they simply put it in front of the sentence to form a question.

So with that sentence 'You see the dog," they could put the word *do* in the front and get 'Do you see the dog?' So that gave English two different ways to pose that question – the inverted version 'See you the dog?" and the '*do*' version 'Do you see the dog?" The formal name for this 'do' version is the 'interrogative do'.

I said that this use of *do* to ask a question developed around the time of Chaucer. Well, it appears that the first recorded instance of this development was actually by Chaucer himself. In the Monk's Tale as part of the Cantebury Tales, he wrote, "Fader why do ye wepe" ('father why do you weep'). He used that wording instead of 'father why weep you?' So this is another innovation first found in Chaucer's writings.

Over time, this way of forming a question with the word *do* became standard within English, and it largely replaced the older inverted form. Again, it isn't entirely clear why the '*do*' version won out, but one theory is that it had to do with the emphasis on fixed word order in Middle English. As we've seen, speakers began to rely on the fixed order of Subject-Verb-Object. But when you used the traditional inverted format, the subject and verb were reversed. And it's possible that speakers were uncomfortable with that mixed up word order. But by putting the word *do* at the front, you could maintain the fixed order of Subject-Verb-Object. The statement 'You see the dog' became the question 'Do you see the dog?' So the basic word order was retained. Again, that's just a theory, but there is no question that the '*do*' form became standard in Modern English.

So now, in the time of Chaucer, we have the very beginnings of *do* as a marker to ask a question. And a short time later, we got another development in the use of the word *do*, and that was the use of *do* to express a negative statement as in 'I do not care' instead of the more traditional 'I care not.' I've discussed this evolution before, but generally speaking, Old English made a negative statement by putting the word *ne* before the verb. So 'Ic ne cume' was literally 'I not come.' Then in early Middle English, the verb was often book-ended with *ne* at the front and *not* at the end. So you might have said something more like 'I ne come not.' Then by the later Middle English period, the *ne* disappeared at the front. And you had something more like 'I come not.' And then shortly after the time of Chaucer, we got the modern wording with *do*. The word *not* was shifted forward before the verb, and the word *do* was added to the phrase. So we end up with 'I do not come."

This modern phrasing is found for the first time around the year 1400 which was the year that Chaucer died. So it was apparently in use while Chaucer was living. Over time, it has mostly replaced the older form with **not** after the verb, though we do still encounter that older form from time to time. Think about John F. Kennedy's famous line, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.' 'Ask not' was the older style used instead of the more modern 'Do not ask.'

So at this point, around the time of Chaucer, we have most of the modern uses of **do** within English. The original action verb 'do,' the 'substitute do,' the 'emphatic do,' the 'interrogative or question do,' and the 'negative do.'

The 'meaningless do' as in 'The sun doth shine' was also being used, even though it has mostly disappeared over time. Outside of the occasional poetic use, we don't hear it much anymore. As I noted earlier, Chaucer used it when he said that 'Phoebus doth spread his bright beams,' but it's mostly gone today.

So with that, let's pick back up with Troilus and Criseyde. Unfortunately, I don't have time for a detailed account of the rest of the poem, but let me give you a quick summary. In the second book, Pandarus tells Criseyde that Troilus is in love with her, and he arranges for them to write letters to each other. They continue to exchange letters and a relationship is soon formed. Panderus eventually arranges a meeting where the two potential lovers finally meet face to face. In Book Three, Pandarus invites Criseyde to his home and secretly has Troilus arrive through a hidden door. The two lovers finally consummate their relationship. In Book Four, Criseyde's father arranges a treaty between Greece and Troy in which the Greek camp agrees to return a captured Trojan girl in exchange for Criseyde. So Criseyde will be forced to join her father in the Greek camp and leave Troilus behind. The lovers meet and Troilus is so distraught that he threatens to kill himself, but Criseyde assures him that she will deceive her father and return from the Greek camp in ten days. The final book – Book Five – begins with the exchange. Ceiseyde is offered protection by the Greek warrior Diomedes. Diomedes woos her with love songs, and Criseyde soon realizes that she needs his protection, and the two begin an affair. After ten days, Creiseyde does not return to Troy, and Troilus suspects that she has fallen in love with someone else. He writes her letters, but her replies are short and vague. Eventually, the Trojans capture one of Diomedes' boats, and Troilus finds a broach which he had given to Criseyde. He realizes that his suspicions were correct and that Criseyde has taken another lover. Troilus is heart-broken and soon dies in battle.

This basically concludes the poem, but Chaucer ends the poem by apologizing to his readers for having presented women in such a bad light. He says that he was merely recounting a story with an ending that had already been written by others. If he had his choice, he would have written of Penelope or Alceste who were legendary Greek women known for their fidelity and loyalty to their husbands.

He then writes:

Go, little book, my little tragedy!
God grant that thy maker, before his ending day,
May write some tale of comedy.

Go, litel boke, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther god thi makere yet, er that he dye,
So sende myght to make in some comedye;

And then Chaucer nears his conclusion with these telling words:

And since there is such great diversity
in English and the writing of our tongue,
So I pray to god that no man mis-write thee,
Nor get the meter wrong through mistake of tongue.

Here's the passage in the original Middle English:

And for ther is so gret diuersite
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
So prey I god that non myswrite the,
Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge.

These words are revealing because they point to Chaucer's recognition that his London dialect was only one dialect of English and that in other parts of the country people spoke very differently. He knew that scribes in other parts of the country would have to modify his poetry to be fully understood, and he hoped that the translators would honor the original and not make a mockery of his writings.

Now before I conclude, I should note that Chaucer did redeem himself a bit for any negative impression of women which may have resulted from Troilus and Criseyde. He wrote one more significant poem before starting work on the Canterbury Tales. This other poem was called the Legend of Good Women, and it is another dream vision and it was dedicated to Queen Anne – formerly known as Anne of Bohemia. It is a celebration of famous women who have died or have been betrayed by lovers. It's a series of short biographies, and many scholars think that Queen Anne actually asked Chaucer to compose the poem, perhaps in response to Troilus and Criseyde. Again the poem was dedicated to Anne. A further piece of evidence for this theory is that Chaucer's good friend and fellow poet John Gower composed his most well-known poem around this same time. That poem is called 'Confessio Amantis,' and it is also a series of love tales. There are some strong similarities between the themes of the two poems, and it seems that both poets may have composed their respective poems with similar themes at the same time because they were each commissioned to do so. However, Chaucer's poem is another uncompleted work. It seems that he never got around to writing a proper conclusion.

That may have been because he was consumed with a new project – a project that was similar in some respects to the Legend of Good Women. It was also a collection of stories, but these were stories of a very different nature – some elevated, some bawdy – all told by a variety of people who represented a cross section of English society. Of course, this massive work was the Canterbury Tales. And next time, we'll turn our attention to that important piece of literature – the most well-known work of literature composed in Middle English.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.

EPISODE 127: THE ROAD TO CANTERBURY

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 127: The Road to Canterbury. In this episode, we're going to begin our look at the most well-known piece of Middle English literature – the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer. It's taken a long time to get here, but we are finally at a point where we can discuss an English text that a lot of people have actually heard of. And since this book is sometimes assigned to school students, some of you may have actually read part of this book – probably via a Modern English translation. In this episode, we're going to explore the background of the poem, and the circumstances that led Geoffrey Chaucer to compose it in the late 1300s. We'll also explore the opening passages of the General Prologue of the poem. This Prologue is probably the most well-known part of the book, and it provides a fascinating insight into the nature of the English language in the 14th century. So this time, we'll take the road the Canterbury, and we'll begin our look at the Canterbury Tales.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

[AUDIO CLIP]

The clip I just played for you is part of a reading from the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales read in the original Middle English. Now you might assume that it was from some university lecture on Medieval English, or perhaps it was from a poetry reading at some local book store. But it wasn't. It's actually a clip from the Martin Scorcese concert film called The Last Waltz. In 1976, Scorcese filmed the final concert of the classic rock group known as The Band. Well, it was the final performance of the original line-up of the band. It was huge event, and it included some of the biggest bands and performers of the day like Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Eric Clapton, and many others. But there's also this interesting performance right in the middle of the film. A poet and writer named Michael McClure appeared on stage, and he read the opening lines of the Canterbury Tales in Chaucer's original Middle English.

And I mention this somewhat out-of-place performance because it points to the enduring legacy of the Canterbury Tales. It's really the first work of Middle English literature that we've encountered so far in the podcast that is widely known in popular culture today. So even though the Canterbury Tales was composed over six centuries ago, many people still feel a connection to it.

In this episode, I want to explore the background of the poem. I'll discuss the political and personal events which led Chaucer to move to Kent and to travel the same roads that were traveled by the pilgrims who he described in the poem. And then we'll explore that opening passage of the Canterbury Tales in some detail. It may the most well-known passage of English literature before the time of Shakespeare, so it deserves some attention.

Let's begin this story where we left off last time. In the last episode, we looked at the middle period of Chaucer's career from the mid-1370s through the mid-1380s. During that period, he composed several major poems. He also continued to live in London where he was born and raised and where he maintained a steady job as the Controller of the Customs at the Port of London. He also maintained a close connection to the royal court, including the young king Richard II and his powerful uncle John of Gaunt. All in all, it appears to have been a comfortable and prosperous period in Chaucer's life.

Chaucer was a prolific writer during this period, but we also saw in the last episode that he was concerned about the copying and distribution of his poetry. One of his last poems during this period was Troilus and Criseyde, and at the end of the poem, he wrote an appeal to the scribes who would copy the poem in the future. He prayed that they would not 'miswrite' it or get the meter wrong when transcribing it. He acknowledged that there were many different ways of speaking English at the time, and he hoped that his words would not be twisted or misrepresented by others. It was an acknowledgment that scribes routinely made minor changes to a text when they were copying and transcribing it, and it bothered Chaucer so much that he apparently felt the need to put that plea in writing at the end of the poem.

Along these same lines, we have another fascinating fragment from this same time period. Chaucer had recently completed Troilus and Criseyde, as well as a translation of the text known as "Consolation of Philosophy' by the Roman statesman Boethius. Chaucer had those works copied by his personal scribe named Adam, but apparently he was not happy with Adam's work. So he composed a short poem to Adam chastising him for his sloppiness. Here is the short poem, first in Modern English:

Adam scrivener, it if continues to fall upon you
to mis-write Boethius or Troilus
Then may you acquire scabs or scales under your long locks of hair.
After I complete my works, you must copy them more truly,
Because after a day I have to renew your work
To correct it and also to rub and scrape,
And all of that is through your negligence

Here's the passage in Chaucer's original Middle English:

Adam scriveyn, if ever it thee bifalle
Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,
Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,
But after my makyng thow wryte more trewe;
So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,
It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,
And al is thorugh thy negligence and rape.

So here we see Chaucer begging Adam to be more careful. It seems to be playful ribbing, and it also appears that he and Adam routinely worked together. So who was this scribe named Adam? Well, modern scholars have tried to solve that mystery. They've examined the handwriting in many of Chaucer's surviving manuscripts. And they have compared that handwriting to the handwriting in other documents, including the surviving records of the scriveners' guild at the time. And many of those scholars agree that the full name of the 'Adam' referenced in this poem was Adam Pynkhurst. As I noted in an earlier episode, the private book-making industry really emerged in the 1300s, and there were lots of professional scribes who were hired to copy books and manuscripts. Many people often used the same scribe over and over, and it appears that Chaucer usually worked with Adam Pynkhurst, even if he was sometimes unhappy with Adam's work. And the reason why Adam is so important to this story is because it appears that he played a crucial role in the organization of the Canterbury Tales as we know it today. And I'll explain that connection a little later in the episode.

Now around the time that this little poem was composed to Adam the scribe, Chaucer found himself at a personal and professional crossroads. The political winds were changing in England. As I noted, Chaucer was a supporter of the young king Richard II. In the year 1385, Richard was still a teenager – about 18 years old. But there was a growing unease with his rule.

Richard had many of the same problems as his predecessors. He surrounded himself with a small group of exclusive advisors, and he enriched them with lands and titles. He also spent money in lots of other places. He maintained a lavish court, and he incurred significant debts.

Meanwhile, his foreign policy was a disaster. First and foremost, Richard's forces couldn't manage a victory in France. This was a low-point for England during the Hundred Years War.

Then, Richard embarked on a failed invasion of Scotland. As we know, Scotland and France were allied against England. And through that alliance, France maintained garrisons in Scotland, so Richard marched his forces into Scotland to get rid of those garrisons. But the Scots avoided a direct battle. And over time, the English forces ran out of supplies, so Richard retreated back to England. With each of these events, the opposition to Richard's rule grew stronger, and the status of Richard's supporters became more precarious. That included Geoffrey Chaucer who was Controller of the Customs at the Port of London thanks to his connections to the royal court.

Around the same time that Richard retreated from Scotland, Chaucer got a new gig. In August of 1385, he was appointed as a Justice of the Peace for the county of Kent. Now this was an interesting development because Kent was the County where Canterbury was located, and up until this point, Chaucer had no clear connections to Kent or Canterbury. He had spent most of his life in and around London. So it's interesting that he was suddenly made a Justice of the Peace for Kent which was located to the southeast of London.

Now being a Justice of the Peace was not a full-time job. He was one of nine justices for Kent, and the justices only met four times a year. Each session usually lasted about three days. So for the time being, Chaucer kept his job as the Controller of the Customs at the London port. But his appointment as a justice shows that he was starting to spend some time in Kent and was probably

traveling down to Canterbury on the same roads that took pilgrims to Canterbury Cathedral. The Cathedral was a popular destination for pilgrims because it contained the shrine of Thomas Becket.

We looked at the life and death of Thomas Becket way back in Episode 84. As you may recall, he was the Archbishop of Canterbury, and he was murdered at Canterbury Cathedral by knights acting on behalf of the king – Henry II. Henry denied involvement claiming that his criticism of Becket had been misinterpreted by the knights. At any rate, Becket immediately became a martyr, and he was soon elevated to sainthood. His shrine at Canterbury became the most popular pilgrimage site in England, and two centuries later, pilgrims were still making that trek to Canterbury. And again, Geoffrey Chaucer probably made the same trek while serving as Justice of the Peace in the county where Canterbury was located.

As I noted, Chaucer initially kept his house and his main job in London , so he was splitting time between London and Kent. But the situation in London was starting to become more precarious. Opposition to King Richard's rule was growing, and his advisors and supporters were starting to come under attack.

During the following year – 1386 – the political situation became even more tenuous for Richard. The French king had gathered a fleet of ships on the northern coast of France with plans to launch a massive invasion of England. The invasion was hampered by weather, and it was ultimately stymied by the English navy, but when Parliament met late in that year, it still looked like the invasion was imminent, and the members of Parliament was not at all happy with the young English king.

The Parliament that met in that year is known as the Wonderful Parliament, and it was really an opportunity for Richard's political opponents to lash out at him. Of course, the Parliament included both nobles and prominent commoners. And among that group of commoners, there was one very peculiar figure. His name was Geoffrey Chaucer.

Again, the circumstances here are a bit of a mystery, but Chaucer was actually a member of the Commons in that year representing the County of Kent. He was still officially the Controller of the Customs in London, and as far we know, he was still officially a resident of London. He continued to maintain his house there. So why was he suddenly a member of Parliament from Kent? Well, most scholars think that Chaucer's attendance was part of an attempt by the king's allies to pack the Parliament with supporters – at least enough supporters to water-down some of the strong opposition. The local county sheriffs had a lot of influence over the selection of the representatives to the Commons, and the sheriff of Kent was a strong supporter of the king. So it is believed that he oversaw the selection of Chaucer to this particular Parliament since Chaucer was close to the royal court.

But what about the fact that Chaucer still lived in London? Well, as I noted earlier, he was a Justice of the Peace in Kent, and it is possible that he also had a home there even though the property records don't list him as an owner anywhere in Kent. Maybe he rented a home there, or maybe he lived with family members there. There is some evidence that his mother's family was

from Kent. But technically, it didn't really matter anyway because a representative didn't have to live in the county they represented. Whatever the circumstances, Chaucer was designated as a so-called 'knight of the shire' from Kent, and he represented the county in Parliament in 1386.

If Chaucer was chosen as part of an attempt to pack the Parliament, it was unsuccessful. The young king's opponents outnumbered his supporters, and Chaucer found himself in the minority. King Richard wanted to levy to large tax, but the proposal was immediately rejected. Richard then came under attack for his frivolous spending and the lack of revenues generated by the government. His opponents scrutinized every expenditure and every source of income, and several of Chaucer's friends and allies came under attack. There is no evidence that Chaucer himself was a target, but he probably felt some pressure as the Controller of the Customs since he was responsible for the revenues coming in from the port. At one point, the young king walked out the Parliament for several days effectively bringing the Parliament's business to a halt, but he eventually returned. In the end, the Parliament gave him a much smaller tax than he wanted, and in return, the Parliament established a council to audit his finances and to oversee and regulate future spending. It was intended as a check on Richard's spending habits.

As soon as the Parliament came to an end, Chaucer gave up his position as Controller of the Customs, and he also gave up his residence in London which was apparently tied to that job. The timing and circumstances have led many scholars to conclude that Chaucer was forced out of his job due to the political pressure. And maybe that was the case. Or maybe Chaucer had good instincts, and he saw the writing on the wall. And I say that because the situation was about to get even worse for King Richard and his closest advisors.

Richard eventually declared that the men who imposed that council upon him had committed treason. In return, his opponents declared that his advisors were traitors. The two sides nearly went to war, but Richard's opponents got the upper hand. They then launched what became known as the Merciless Parliament. Many of the king's close advisors and supporters were convicted of treason and were executed. In many cases, the men were convicted with little or no evidence of any actual wrong-doing. The only crime they committed was being a close advisor and ally of the king. That's why it was called the Merciless Parliament. And had Chaucer still been the Controller of the Customs, we may never have gotten the Canterbury Tales because Chaucer may have found himself in the same cross-hairs as many of his friends and colleagues. In fact, several of his close friends were caught up in the hysteria and were executed.

Chaucer avoided much of that conflict because he had retired from his old government job and he had moved out of London. It appears that he moved to the town of Greenwich. Today, Greenwich is actually part of southeastern London, but in the late 1300s, it was a separate town outside of the city, and it was part of County of Kent. It was also located on that pilgrimage route from London to Canterbury.

For Chaucer, it was a time of transition and perhaps a period of semi-retirement. It may have also been a very grim period for him. Around the time of his move to Kent, his wife Phillipa. So within a few months, he lost his wife, his main job, and his house in London. Records also show

that his regular annuities were terminated, and he was sued for several outstanding debts during this period, so he was apparently experiencing financial difficulties as well.

It was during this time that Chaucer began work on the Canterbury Tales, and interestingly, it was his first major poem that didn't have a courtly setting. Being somewhat removed from the royal court for the first time in his adult life, he chose to take a different and unique approach. He chose to write about the common people who traveled the roads as pilgrims.

As I noted, pilgrimages were a big deal in the Middle Ages. Going back to the Crusades, one of the factors contributing to that conflict was the desire of the Western Church to ensure that European pilgrims could get safe access to the Holy Land. Some pilgrims who made their way to Rome or Jerusalem in the Mediterranean would bring back sprigs of palm trees as souvenirs, and that led to the word *palmer* as another term for a pilgrim. That word mainly survives today as a surname.

The word *palmer* first appeared in English documents in the early 1300s, but the word *pilgrim* can be traced back to the late Anglo-Saxon period. Though there is some evidence of the word *pilgrim* in Old English, it didn't really become common in English until the 1200s. It is actually a Latin term borrowed from French. I gave the etymology of *pilgrim* in one of the first few episodes of the podcast, but since that was a long time ago, let me give you a quick reminder. It is derived from a combination of two Latin root words. The first is *per* meaning 'through or beyond' and the second is *ager* meaning 'land or a field.' Those words were combined to form the word *peregrinus* which literally meant one who comes from beyond the field or one who comes from another land. But over time, the word came to refer to someone who traveled to other lands, and the pronunciation evolved from *peregrinus* to *peregrin* to *pelerin* to *pilgrim*. But the main point is that the words *pilgrim* and *palmer* were both in common use in the late 1300s when Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales.

Another word which may have a connection to those early pilgrims is the word *roam* (R-O-A-M). And I say 'may' because this etymology is disputed. But one theory is that the verb '*to roam*' is actually derived from the name of the city of Rome. The idea is that many early pilgrims traveled to Rome, and the process of traveling the winding roads and taking the roundabout way to Rome was called 'to roam.' Some scholars deny this etymology, and they suggest that the verb '*to roam*' was derived from an earlier Old English or Germanic word – perhaps related to the word *ramble*. But the word *roam* (R-O-A-M) isn't found in Old English. It didn't appear in English until the 1300s at a time when French words were pouring in. And the Romance languages have similar words related to pilgrims which are definitely derived from the name of the city. For example, the Old French word *romier* meant a pilgrim, and that word originally referred to someone who traveled to Rome on a pilgrimage. And in fact, if you're a fan of Romeo and Juliet, the name *Romeo* is an Italian name derived from the same Latin root. It originally meant a pilgrim or wanderer within Italian. So it is possible – and the Oxford English Dictionary says 'probable' – that the verb '*to roam*' was derived from the name of the city of Rome, and originally referred to the travels of pilgrims.

Now in the years after leaving London, Chaucer apparently found himself on the same roads as all of those pilgrims or palmers 'roaming' down to Canterbury. And he decided to use the idea of a pilgrimage for his next major work.

The idea was simple. A group of pilgrims would come together at an inn in Southwark which is usually pronounced today as /suth-erk/. It was located on the south bank of the Thames across the river from the main part of London. That was a common meeting place for pilgrims as they traveled though London on their way to Canterbury. The group of pilgrims would represent a cross-section of society from a knight all the way down to a plowman. A host would recommend that the group ride together to Canterbury and that they entertain themselves by telling stories on the way there and on the way back. The pilgrim who told the best story would receive a free meal at the host's tavern upon their return. This scenario would set the stage not only for the collection of stories, but also for the various interactions between pilgrims. In fact, many scholars consider the actual stories to be a bit 'hit and miss.' Some are better than others. But what tends to fascinate most readers is the description of the pilgrims and the way in which they interact with other.

This idea of having a variety of common people tell stories was really unique to Chaucer, even though other types of story collections were common. For example, there were many collections containing poems about the lives of various saints. Collections of beast fables were also popular. And as I noted in an earlier episode, the Italian poet Boccaccio had composed a well-known poem called Decameron which featured several people telling stories in the countryside as they tried to escape the ravages of the Black Death. But all of those collections featured the same types of stories or the same types of story-tellers. They tended to be variations on a common theme.

For the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer decided to do something different. He assembled a collection of story-tellers who were vastly different from each other and who told a wide variety of stories from different genres and in different styles. Nothing quite like it had ever been written before – and certainly not in English.

Now we know that Chaucer had already composed a couple of the stories used in the Canterbury Tales long before he moved to Kent. So these stories apparently pre-dated the concept of the poem. Presumably, these early stories were originally intended as separate stand-alone works. One of those stories was an abbreviated version of a tale told by Boccaccio about two Greek cousins who are captured in war and are held as prisoners. They both fall in love with the same woman who they see from their prison cell. One of them is later released and the other escapes, and they both return to compete for the love of the woman. It a classic bit of medieval romance, and we know from Chaucer's writings that he had composed his version of the story several years earlier. But now, it became the first tale of the new Canterbury Tales. It became the tale told by the Knight which made sense because it was the type of courtly poem that one might associate with knights.

Some of the other tales were also influenced by other poets which wasn't unusual in the Middle Ages. Other tales were original to Chaucer. Some were left unfinished. And others were revised and rewritten as Chaucer proceeded with the project. It appears that he worked on the Canterbury Tales for the next decade or so, and he never really finished it.

About twelve years after leaving London for Kent, Chaucer finally decided to return home. In the year 1398, he moved to Westminster which was still a separate town just west of the main city of London. He lived there until his death a couple of years later in the year 1400. He was originally buried by the entrance to St. Benedict's Chapel, but a few years later, his body was moved to Westminster Abbey. And today, his body lies in a part of the abbey known as Poet's Corner.

Now as I noted, Chaucer never really completed the Canterbury Tales. When he died, he left several fragments or groupings of tales. For example, the General Prologue which begins the poem is immediately followed by the Knight's Tale which I just mentioned. That tale is immediately followed by the tale of the drunken Miller. It's a bawdy and somewhat obscene story that plays on the idea of romance introduced by the knight – only the Miller provides a very different type of romance. So the Miller's Tale is specifically told in response to the Knight's Tale. Then the Reeve steps in, and he tells a story that is a direct response to the Miller's Tale. The point is that some of these tales are clearly linked together, and they were intended to go in a certain order. But Chaucer never put all the tales together into a final version with a fixed running order. The tales I just mentioned clearly go first. And there is a specific tale that concludes the poem and goes at the end. But otherwise, the various remaining tales in the middle could have gone in just about any order.

So when Chaucer died, it was left to others to put all of these various fragments together. There were ten fragments or groupings in all. The details here are not known for certain, but it is possible that Chaucer's son or some other close associates decided to turn the fragments into a proper manuscript. And it also appears that that responsibility was given to Chaucer's personal scribe Adam Pinkhurst. He was the scribe who Chaucer had chastised in that poem several years earlier. Adam was apparently enlisted to put the various tales together.

The reason why Adam is credited with this project by many modern scholars is because two of the earliest surviving copies of the manuscript appear to be in his handwriting. These manuscripts were compiled shortly after Chaucer's death. The first is known as the Hengwrt manuscript. The second manuscript is called the Ellesmere manuscript, and it puts the tales in a slightly different and more logical order. It is also a beautiful manuscript with many illustrations – including color illustrations of Chaucer and the various pilgrims. This version of the manuscript was considered to be of such high quality that it became the basis for most of the modern versions of the book. So most modern versions follow the sequence of the Ellemere manuscript. In fact, I should note that this particular manuscript is currently maintained at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. So it's one of those rare early manuscripts that's actually located in North America.

Now Adam the Scribe didn't just compile the various tales into a formal manuscript. He also included certain notes which have became part of the final version. For example, the Cook's Tale follows the Reeve's Tale, but the Cook's Tale was never completed. So at the end of the tale fragment, Adam wrote, "Of this Cook's Tale Chaucer made no more." And that line is part of most standard versions of the poem that are still printed today.

These two early manuscripts were followed by many more. There are about 50 complete copies of the Canterbury Tales from the 1400s. The ordering of the tales varies within those surviving manuscripts. There are also about 30 other fragments or pieces of a final manuscript which survive from this same period.

About 80 years after Chaucer's death, William Caxton established the first printing press in England. And the first book published by that first printing press in England was the Canterbury Tales. So it is one of the most published books in English history.

So that's the story behind the making of the Canterbury Tales. Now, in the second half of this episode, I want to take you through the first part of the poem called the General Prologue. That's the part I played at the beginning of the episode, and it is the most-well known part of the Canterbury Tales. In fact, the opening lines are probably the most well-known verses in all of the Middle English.

So I'm going to do something a little different this time. I'm going to begin with an extended reading of the passage in Modern English and then in the original Middle English. Then, I'm going to go back through the same passage and analyze each line. So here are the opening lines of the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer.

When April with his showers sweet with fruit
Has pierced the drought of March to the root
And bathed every vein in that liquid
from whose power the flower's birth is given
When Zephyrus also with his breath so sweet
Inspires the tender crops in every wood and heath
and the course of the bright young sun
half through the sign of the ram has run
And small fowls make melodies so nice
And sleep all night with open eyes
So in their hearts nature encourages
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And pilgrims desire to seek strange strands
To distant shrines known in various lands
And especially from every shire's end
from there to Canterbury they do wend
The holy blissful martyr they seek
Who helped them when they were sick and weak

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 halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye-
(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.

Those are the opening lines of the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. The first thing to note is that it uses a very familiar rhyming scheme and meter. It's called 'iambic pentameter,' and Chaucer was one of the first English writers to use it in his poetry. Chaucer used it for most of the Canterbury Tales, though he did depart from it in a few instances.

Iambic pentameter basically means that each line consists of 10 syllables with the stress or emphasis on every other syllable. Some people compare it to a series of heartbeats – da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM. And if you want to do a proper reading of the poem, each line is supposed to have that rhythm.

WHAN that APrill, WITH his SHOUres SOOte
The DROGHTE of MARCH hath PERced TO the ROOte

This is the rhythm of the Canterbury Tales. Now, as is often the case with poetry, an extra syllable may find its way into a line from time-to-time, but we're still dealing with the same basic rhythm and pattern.

The reason why that's so important to language historians is that it helps to show how the words were actually pronounced in Chaucer's day. It shows us which syllables had stress and which didn't. And it also shows us that silent letters in some modern words weren't silent in the late 1300s. If the letters were silent, the rhythm wouldn't have worked, so they had to have been pronounced.

This is especially important for all of those words that ended in E. You might remember that many of the Old English inflectional endings had either disappeared or had been reduced to simple 'eh' sound at the end of words. This sound was represented with the letter E. And many

of those words still have that letter E today – only today, that E is silent in most cases. Words like *time* and *date* and *rope* and many, many others all have silent E's today that were once pronounced in earlier periods of English.

Well, around the time of Chaucer, some of those E's were starting to become silent. And Chaucer's rhythms show us which words still had the 'eh' sound at the end and which ones had lost it.

As I noted, the rhythm also shows us the stress pattern in certain words, and sometimes the stresses were different in Chaucer's day. English had borrowed a lot of French words, and French words tended to be stressed on the final syllable. But English words were usually stressed on the first syllable. So over time, the stress has tended to shift forward to the first syllable in many of those French loanwords. But when we listen to the Canterbury Tales, we can often hear that the shift had not occurred yet in the late 1300s. So in the fourth line, Chaucer uses the word *virtue* which was borrowed from French in the 1200s. Today, the stress has shifted to the first syllable – /VIR-tue/ – but in the time of Chaucer, it was still being pronounced as /vir-TUE/. And we know that in part because that's the pronunciation required to maintain the rhythm of the line:

Of WHICH verTU enGENdred IS the FLOUR;

And speaking of French loanwords, Chaucer is considered to be a master at incorporating those loanwords into his English poems. His writings show the extent to which French had infiltrated the English vocabulary by the late 1300s. It is estimated that English had borrowed about 10,000 French words by the time of Chaucer's death in 1400. [*SOURCE: The History of the English Language, Baugh and Cable (p. 168)*]

In the passage I just read, we have French and Latin loanwords like *March*, *pierced*, *vein*, *liquor*, *virtue*, *engendered*, *flower*, *inspired*, *tender*, *course*, *nature*, *courage*, *pilgrims*, *pilgrimage*, *palmer*, *strange*, and *specially*.

That works out to about 15% of the words used in that passage which is roughly the same percentage of French words used throughout the entire poem. I'll have a lot more to say about Chaucer's use of those loanwords in the next episode, but for now, we just need to keep in mind that he routinely incorporated French and Latin words into his writings, and he is the first known writer to use a lot of those new loanwords.

Chaucer wrote in a London dialect, but London was located near the intersection of three different dialect regions. The East Midlands dialect was the dominant dialect of eastern England north of the Thames. The Southern dialect was the dominant dialect of the far south – south of the Thames. And Kent had a slightly different dialect which was spoken in the far southeastern corner of the country. We've looked at some aspects of those dialects in prior episodes.

Chaucer's writings actually show elements of all three dialects which probably had to do with the fact that London was located near all three of those regions, and also the fact that many people from those regions had moved to London after the Black Death as the feudal system broke down in the countryside.

We can see some of that blending of dialects in the first couple of lines of the Canterbury Tales. In Modern English, the lines literally read:

When that April with his showers sweet
The drought of March has pierced to the root

In the original Middle English, it reads:

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote

In the first line, we have the word *showers* with a plural 's' ending. You might remember that Middle English had two common ways to mark a plural noun – either the 's' ending that we use today or the 'en' ending still found in words like *children*, *oxen* and *brethren*. Both of those endings were derived from different Old English inflections, but as those inflections were simplified, the north of England came to rely upon the 's' ending, and the south of England came to rely upon the 'en' ending. So up until the late 1300s, you would have generally found the 'en' ending in documents composed around London. But throughout the 1300s, the 's' ending had moved south through the Midlands. And by the time we get to Chaucer, we find that he mostly used that northern 's' ending. Here he uses *showers*, and in the next few lines he uses *crops*, and *pilgrims* and *pilgrimages*. So our modern 's' ending to mark plural nouns had finally become a fixture around London.

In the second line, Chaucer writes that the drought of March 'hath' pierced to the root. So he uses *hath* with a 'th' rather than the more modern *has* with an 's.' Now this represents another north-south divide. As we've seen before, the north used the 's' ending with verbs in 3rd person. So "He has," "She sleeps," "It seems." But in the south, the 'th' ending was used. "He hath," "She sleepeth," and 'It seemeth." By the time of Chaucer, both forms were being used in the Midlands, but here we see him using the more traditional Southern form *hath*, and of course, that ending lingered on into the early Modern English period. We still hear it the King James Bible and the writings of Shakespeare.

Now lets look at the next couple of lines. Here's a literal Modern English translation:

And bathed every vein in such liquor,
of which virtue engendered is the flower.

Here's the original passage:

And BATHed EVery VEYNE in SWICH liCOUR,
Of WHICH verTU enGENdred IS the FLOUR;

So again, there's that iambic pentameter rhythm. And it confirms that *virtue* was pronounced /vir-TUE/, and *liquor* was pronounced /li-KOR/. So the stress was still on the second syllable at the time. And over the centuries, those words have become Anglicized with the stress moving forward to the first syllable.

Also, as I noted in an earlier episode, the word *liquor* didn't mean an alcoholic drink originally. It was actually derived from the same Latin root as *liquid*, and initially, it still had that more generic meaning as liquid. And that's the way Chaucer used it here. Some cooks still refer to a cooking broth as 'pot liquor,' but today, the word has become mostly restricted to fermented or alcoholic liquids.

Chaucer says that 'April showers have bathed every vein in such liquor' – so the rain has bathed every vein of the flowers in liquid. He uses the word *veyne* spelled V-E-Y-N-E. And the rhythm of the line suggests that the E at the end of that word was already silent by the time of this poem. To pronounce the E would have thrown off the rhythm.

There's also a question here as to how that word *veyne* was actually pronounced at the time. In the passage, it's spelled with an 'EY' (V-E-Y-N-E), and there is some disagreement among scholars as to the specific sound of that vowel at the time. Modern scholars think they know the Middle English sounds represented by the basic vowel letters A, E, I, O, U and Y. Those sounds sometimes varied from region to region and from one dialect to the next, but scholars think they know with some certainty how they were pronounced in various parts of the country. But when we get to vowel combinations like 'EI' or 'EY' – or 'AI' or 'AY' – things get a little more complicated. In these cases, the letters are presumably representing diphthongs which are the combination of two separate vowel sounds into one.

So for example, the modern /ay/ sound in the word *vein* is really a diphthong. It's a combination of /eh/ and /ee/. When pushed together, you get /eh-ee/ – or if you squeeze it into one syllable – /ay/. And since the /eh/ and /ee/ sounds were represented with the letters E and I – or E and Y – in Middle English, most scholars think this 'EI' or 'EY' spelling represented the /ay/ sound, at least early on when this spelling was adopted. So V-E-Y-N-E would have represented /vain/ when that spelling was adopted. And that's the way we pronounce the word today. V-E-I-N is /vain/.

But we also have the word V-A-I-N which is also pronounced /vain/. That word can mean feeble as in 'to try in vain.' And it can mean conceited as in 'you're so vain.' But notice that it is spelled with 'AI' instead of 'EI.' Well, the 'AI' spelling can also be found in Middle English, but it apparently represented a different sound at one time. It represented the sound produced when you combined /ah/ and /ee/, and that was /ah-ee/ or /eye/. So in early Middle English, around the year 1300, V-E-I-N or V-E-Y-N was /vain/. But V-A-I-N was /vine/.

But at some point in the 1300s, the distinction between these two sounds was lost. They merged together and became the same sound. At least that's what happened in and around London. And we know that happened in part because Chaucer routinely rhymed words with those distinct spellings. So for example, the early form of our word *way*, as in 'show me the way,' was usually spelled W-E-I. So it was probably pronounced /way/ much like today. And the word *day* was spelled D-A-I, and was probably pronounced /die/. But in the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer routinely rhymed those two words. And of course, today, the words *way* and *day* have the same vowel sound, as do the two different versions of the word *vain* – V-E-I-N and V-A-I-N. So based on modern pronunciations, and based on the fact that poets like Chaucer routinely rhymed those types of words in the late 1300s, it appears that the sounds represented by those spellings merged together at some point in the 1300s. But what sound did they use? Was it /ay/ or /ai/?

Well, we might assume that the sounds merged into /ay/ because that's the way we pronounce those words today – *vein*, *vain*, *way*, *day* – they all have the /ay/ sound today. And some scholars think that's what happened. But we have to keep in mind that this was before the Great Vowel Shift, when most of the long vowel sounds shifted around, and in most cases, they were raised higher in the mouth. So the other possibility is that they merged into /ai/ which is pronounced lower and in the back of the mouth, and then they were raised to /ay/ during the Great Vowel Shift. In that case, all of these words would have been pronounced by Chaucer with an /ai/ sound – /vine/, /why/ and /die/ – instead of /vain/, /way/ and /day/. And there are other scholars who think that is what happened.

But there is also a third view which I find even more compelling, and that's that the sounds merged somewhere in the middle – something like /æ-ee/ which is located in between /ai/ and /ay/. So in the mouth, you would go from /ai/ to /æi/ to /ay/. So if this is what happened, words like *vain*, *way* and *day* would have been pronounced /væin/, /wæi/ and /dæi/. And then when the Great Vowel Shift occurred, that in-between vowel was raised up slighted up to /ay/, thereby giving us modern *vain*, *way* and *day*. This is the view advocated by Chaucerian scholars like Helge Kokeritz in his book called "A Guide to Chaucer's Pronunciation," and Peter Beidler in his book called "A Student Guide to Chaucer's Middle English."

So the bottom line is that when we encounter spellings with EI, or EY, or AI or AY in Chaucer's works, the spellings apparently represented the same sound because Chaucer rhymed those words. And the sound represented a range somewhere between /ai/, /æi/ and /ay/. And I mention that because I got some feedback about my pronunciation of the name *Criseyde* in the last episode when I talked about Chaucer's poem Troilus sand Criseyde. Several of you contacted me to suggest that the pronunciation should have been /cri-sayd/. And that is a very common modern pronunciation using the modern /ay/ pronunciation. But again, the nature of that sound in Chaucer's time was somewhere between /ai/ and /ay/ – probably more like /cris-æid/. So that's part of the reason why I pronounced with it with the lower vowel sound. Also, there's a great audiobook of the poem read by the British narrator Charlton Griffin, and he also pronounced the name as Criseyde. So that was a factor as well. But ultimately, I don't think you can go wrong with any of those pronunciations. And there was probably variation even during the time of Chaucer, just as there is variation in the pronunciation of vowel sounds today.

So we've only looked at the first four lines of the Canterbury Tales, but we've already uncovered a lot of linguistic nuggets. Now lets look at the next few lines – first in a literal Modern English translation:

When Zephyrus also with his sweet breath
Has inspired in every holt and heath
the tender crops, and the young sun
hath in the Ram his half course run.

The original passage reads:

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 halfe cours yronne

So this passage mentions Zephyrus who was the Roman god who brought the winds and breezes associated with springtime. And 'holt and heath' meant the woods and wilderness and uncultivated land. So Zephyrus brings springtime breezes that inspires life in the tender crops in the woods and wilderness. And the young Sun has traveled half its course through the ram – the ram being the zodiac sign of Aires running from March 21 to April 20. So halfway through the course of the Ram means that the events of the poem take place in the middle of that period – sometime in early April.

It should go without saying at this point that it was standard in Middle English poetry to begin the poem in springtime. We've seen that approach used again and again. And obviously, Chaucer has done the same thing here.

Now here are the next couple of lines in a literal Modern English translation:

And small fowls make melody
That sleep all the night with open eye

And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye

So small birds make melodies – or sing songs – and sleep at night with open eyes. The passage I just read actually says that fowls 'maken' melody instead of 'make' melody, and 'slepen' with open eyes instead of 'sleep' with open eyes. That '-en' verb ending was a feature of the Midlands dialects, and it was used when the subject was a plural noun. So since Chaucer was writing about 'fowls' – plural – then they 'maken' and 'slepen' with the '-en' suffix. So this was another Midlands feature in his dialect.

Then we have the next two lines – first in Modern English:

So pricketh them nature in their courages
Then long folk to go on pilgrimages

Now in the original Middle English:

So PRIKeth HEM naTURE in HIR coRAGES;
Thanne LONGen FOLK to GOON on PILgriMAGES

OK. So let's unpack that. The first thing to mention is that the first line uses the pronoun *hem* instead of *them*, and *hir* instead of *their*. Those are the older 'h' forms that were still being used in southern England. As we know, the 'th' forms – *them* and *their* – are the Norse versions, and they were used in the north of England where the Viking influence was much greater. They gradually spread southward, but Chaucer didn't use them in the late 1300s, So they weren't common in London yet. What's interesting though is that he did use the subject form *they*. The pronoun *they* is used throughout the poem. And that is consistent with other observations about the spread of the northern 'th' forms. As they spread southward, the subject form *they* was usually accepted first. Then at a later date, the object and possessive forms – *them* and *their* – were accepted. And the Canterbury Tales was composed right in the middle of that process in southern England. *They* was used, but *them* and *their* weren't.

The next thing to note is that the first line reads 'So priketh hem Nature in hir corages' – 'So pricketh them nature in their courages.' What does that mean? What does it mean for nature to prick them in their courages? Well, the key is that word *courages*. It didn't mean courage in the modern sense. It actually meant their hearts because it was thought that the heart was the center of feeling and emotion. So when nature pricks them in their courages – or hearts – it meant that the springtime touched their hearts and put them in a special state of mind. And then the next line says that – 'the folk or people then long to go on pilgrimages.' So when springtime arrives, it touches people's hearts in a way that it 'encourages' them to go on pilgrimages.

And the verb '*to encourage*' is just a variation of the word *courage*. It meant to inspire or incite. Of course, over time, the meaning of the word *courage* was extended from this original sense of the feeling or emotion stemming from the heart to a more specific sense of confidence or boldness or bravery.

Again all of this stems from the original link between the word *courage* and the heart. And that link is even more apparent when you consider that the word *courage* is actually related to the French word for heart which is *coeur*. And both words are derived from the Latin word for heart which was *cor*. And that Latin word *cor* is actually cognate with the English word *heart*. *Cor* and *heart* both come from the same Indo-European root word. Grimm's Law tells us that the Indo-European 'k' sound became an 'h' sound in the Germanic languages. And in an earlier episode, we saw that *heart* is also cognate with *cardio* and *cardiology* from Greek. So we have *heart* from Old English, *cardio* and *cardiology* from Greek, and *courage* and *encourage* from Latin. All of those words are cognate and all ultimately relate to the heart. And when Chaucer referred to nature pricking folk in the '*courages*' – that's what he meant.

I should also make note of the stress pattern again. The line was:

So PRIK-eth HEM naTURE in HIR corAGES.

So the stress pattern tells us the French loanword *nature* was actually pronounced /na-TURE/ in the French manner with the stress on the second syllable. And the same with *courages*. Here it was actually pronounced /cor-AGES/, again in the French manner. Of course, in both of those words, the stress has shifted forward over time. Like so many French loanwords from this period, both of those words have been Anglicized over the centuries.

By the way, this is a process that still occurs today. Think about the different pronunciations of *homage* (/oh-MADG/) and *homage* (/HA-mij/). And *garage* (/ga-RADG/) which is common in the US versus *garridge* (/GAR-ij/) which is more common in Britain. Those are examples of French loanwords where both pronunciations are used in Modern English – one closer to the original French pronunciation and one that's been Anglicized over the years. And for words like *nature* and *courage*, they also underwent those same changes, but they apparently did so after the time of the Canterbury Tales.

By the way, during this period, the T in *nature* was actually pronounced as a T – /na-TURE/. The modern pronunciation /NAY-chure/ with a 'ch' sound came later.

Now moving on, the next couple of lines of the passage are:

And palmers for to seek strange strands
To far hallows, known in sundry lands

And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;

In that passage, we have the word *palmer* for pilgrim that I discussed earlier in the episode. And again, it mainly survives today as a surname. The word *strand* was the Old English word for shore. In some places, the shoreline is still often referred to as the strand. And the passage also used the word *halwes* – or *hallows* – for shines. If we think of something as 'hallowed,' it usually means that it's sacred. So *hallows* was just another word for shrines. By the way, *hallow* is related to the word *holy*, and its also the root of *Halloween* which is derived from All Hallow's Eve, the day before a specific religious holiday that normally took place on November 1.

So the palmers – or pilgrims – seek far-away hallows – or shrines – on strange and unfamiliar shores.

Then we have the last few lines of this opening passage. First in a literal Modern English translation:

And especially from every shire's end
of England, to Canterbury they wend
The holy blissful martyr for to seek
That them had helped, when that they were sick

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.

So from the end – or far-corner – of every shire in England, the pilgrims make their way to Canterbury. They go to seek the blissful martyr which is the shrine of Thomas Becket. And the passage says that he was the one who helped them when they were sick. In other words, people prayed to Thomas Becket – or Saint Thomas – when they were ill.

So those are the first few lines of the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales. As I noted earlier, it is arguably the most well-known and most referenced passage in all of Middle English literature. And it may be the most well-known passage in English prior to the time of Shakespeare. As you can tell, there is a lot of information in that passage about the overall state of the language at that time in the late 1300s.

Now having introduced the poem and told us that the springtime was the time for pilgrimages, Chaucer then sets the scene at the Tabard Inn in Southwark. Southwark was an area on the south side of the Thames across the river from the main part of London. Chaucer tells us that a group of pilgrims had gathered there ready to make their way to Canterbury. He then provides a brief description of the various pilgrims in attendance. They include a knight, a squire, a yeoman, a prioress, a monk, a miller, a reeve, a merchant, a cook, a plowman, and many others. These people represent a cross-section of English society.

And as Chaucer presents these characters, and as these characters present their tales, Chaucer often shifts his language to reflect each character's social status or place of origin. Obviously, this is a period long before audio tape, so we don't have recordings to illustrate how people of different classes and different regions actually spoke. But we do have the Canterbury Tales, and this type of work is about as close as we can get to that type of recording. Chaucer gives us regional accents and class distinctions. So next time, we'll explore the characters presented by Chaucer, and we'll see how their linguistic differences are reflected in the poem.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.

EPISODE 128: THE CANTERBURY TELLERS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 128: The Canterbury Tellers. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer. It is one of the most popular and enduring works of Middle English literature. And one of the most fascinating aspects of the poem is the wide variety of characters that are presented. These various pilgrims gather together with a common purpose – to go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. The pilgrims represent a cross-section of English society in the late 1300s, and Chaucer paints a vivid picture of each one. In the process, we get an incredible insight into the common people and culture of the Middle Ages. But Chaucer didn't just provide descriptions of his pilgrims. He also modified his language to fit the characters. Very often, he chose words that reflected the social class of the characters, and in one particular tale, he actually had his characters speak in their own local dialect. He is considered to be first English writers to do that. So this time, we'll look at the characters of the Canterbury Tales – in other words, the Canterbury Tellers. And along the way, we'll see what Chaucer's language has to tell us about the state of English in the late 1300s.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, I want to focus on the characters presented by Geoffrey Chaucer in the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer's characters represent a cross-section of English society. They come from different classes and from different parts of the country. And Chaucer often modified his language to fit the characters. Characters from the higher classes often speak differently than those from the lower classes. Those of the higher classes often use more French and Latin words, while those of the lower classes tend to use more Anglo-Saxon words and they often use curse words and speech that would have been considered vulgar by those of upper classes.

Beyond the class differences, Chaucer's characters sometimes speak in their own local dialects. But I'm going to focus on the regional differences in the next episode. In fact, next time, we'll conclude out look at the Canterbury Tales with a particular focus on two of the tales – the Miller's Tale and the Reeve's Tale. Those two stories are fascinating because they represent a type of literature that we've never really explored before in the podcast. They are humorous and bawdy stories featuring risqué humor and adult themes. They represent a style of literature known as a fabliau, and Chaucer was a master at telling those types of stories. It's probably one of the reasons why the Canterbury Tales has been so popular over the centuries.

But this time, I want to complete our look at the General Prologue of book. This is the part where Chaucer sets the scene and where he introduces the numerous pilgrims. It is considered to be one of the most vivid depictions of the common people of England by a contemporary writer of that period. As we explore this Prologue, I'm going to focus on how Chaucer paints a picture of the pilgrims through language. And specifically, I'm going to show how his descriptions reflect the class and social differences which existed at the time.

So let's pick up where we left off last time. In the last episode, we looked at the background of the Canterbury Tales, and we examined the first 18 lines of the General Prologue which is probably the most well-known passage in all of Middle English. The passage tells us that it was springtime in England – the time of year that touched people's hearts and encouraged them to go on pilgrimages. It's a beautifully written passage that suggests that we are about to read some grand piece of courtly poetry. But then Chaucer shifts the scene.

From the English countryside in springtime, we're suddenly taken to an inn called the Tabard in Southwark on the south side of London across the river from the main part of the city. Chaucer tells us that he was at that inn preparing for his own pilgrimage to Canterbury. By the way, the Tabard Inn was an actual inn in Southwark. And on this particular evening, we're told that twenty-nine 'sundry folk' – or random people – came to the inn. They had gathered there to spend the night before heading east to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. While enjoying each other's fellowship, the various pilgrims agreed to make the trip together the next day. Chaucer then provides a description of each of the gathered pilgrims. He introduces the descriptions with the following passage – first in Modern English:

But nonetheless, while I have time and space,
Before any further in this tale I do pace,
I think it according to reason
To tell you all the condition
Of each of them, so as it seemed to me,
And which they were, and of what degree,
And also in what array they were in,
And at a knight then will I first begin.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne;
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne.

So Chaucer proceeds to describe each of the pilgrims – and he begins with the knight – who is the most noble pilgrim in the group. He begins his description of the knight with the following passage:

A knight there was, and he was a worthy man,
That from the time that he first began
To ride out, he loved chivalry,
Truth and honor, freedom and courtesy.

A knight ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.

So that passage tells us that the knight was 'worthy,' which really meant 'worthy of praise.' So in Middle English, it meant that he was honorable or admirable.

Chaucer then says that the knight loved 'truth and honor, freedom and courtesy.' And that's an interesting description because it alternates between native English words and French loanwords. *Truth* from Old English, *honor* from French, *freedom* from Old English, *courtesy* from French, This shows how Chaucer tended to incorporate French terms when talking about characters from the upper classes – especially French terms associated with the nobility like *chivalry*, *honor* and *courtesy*.

Chaucer then tells us that the knight had a 'sovereyn prys,' which was literally a 'sovereign price,' but it meant superior reputation. Again, *sovereign* and *price* are both French loanwords. Today, *sovereign* is often used to refer to a king or queen or supreme ruler, but originally, it could also refer to someone with a superior skill, or ability or reputation. And *price* is directly related to words like *praise* and *prized*. So Chaucer uses the phrase 'sovereign price' to refer to the knight's superior reputation or excellence. But again, he does so with relatively new French loanwords.

Chaucer then tells us that the knight had never said a bad word to any other person in all his life. Here's the original passage as written by Chaucer:

He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.

That passage literally reads:
He never yet no villainy no said
In all his life unto no manner wight.

So in that passage, Chaucer used a quadruple negative. Again:
He never yet no villainy no said
In all his life unto no manner wight – or person.

As I noted in an earlier episode of the podcast, the rule prohibiting double negatives is a relatively modern rule. In earlier periods of English, double negatives were common, as were triple negatives, and as we see here, even quadruple negatives. All those extra negatives like *no* and *not* and *never* were added for emphasis. And that's what Chaucer did here.

Then he concluded his description of the knight by telling us "He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght" – literally 'He was a very, perfect, gentle knight.' All three of those adjectives – *very*, *perfect* and *gentle* – are French loanwords. By the way, *gentle* didn't mean tender or mild in the

modern sense. It meant noble or distinguished or honorable. It's the same sense that we have in the word *gentleman*. So the knight was perfect and gentle, meaning that he was entirely or completely honorable. But Chaucer doesn't just say that the knight was 'perfect and gentle.' He actually says that he was a 'very' perfect, gentle knight. Now we might assume that he did that for emphasis – that he was attempting to say that the knight wasn't just 'perfect,' he was 'very' perfect. And he wasn't just gentle or noble, he was 'very' gentle. That's how we use the word *very* today, but that's not really what the word meant in the late 1300s.

Again, today the word *very* is used as an intensifier – to indicate something extra – to turn *big* into *very big* or *loud* into *very loud*. And it is such a common word in the language, that we might assume that it is a native English word. But it isn't. It's actually a French loanword that was first borrowed into English in the 1200s. But when it was borrowed, it actually had a slightly different meaning. Originally, it meant 'true.' And that connection makes sense when we consider that the word *very* comes from the same Latin root as the word *verify* which is to confirm something as true. Another closely related word is *verily* which means truly. In fact, *verily* is literally the word *very* with an '-ly' suffix, and it was coined at a time when *very* still meant 'true.' Thus, *verily* means 'truly.' And that's how Chaucer used the word here. When he said that the knight was a 'very, perfect, gentle knight,' he meant that he was a true perfect and gentle or honorable knight.

We still have some of that original sense of the word *very* when we say something like 'that very one.' Someone might say, "Is that the house where you were raised?" And you might respond, "Yes, that very one" – meaning, yes, that is the correct one or true one. So in that way, the word *very* can be used to identify something as unique or special. And from there, it was a relatively short jump for it to be used to specify something that stands out as unusual or extreme. And that modern sense of the word *very* started to evolve in the 1400s. So our 'very, very' common word *very* is a French loanword, and it had a slightly different sense when it was first borrowed into English and when it was used by Geoffrey Chaucer.

By the way, before the word *very* became an intensifier with it modern sense, English speakers had to use other words to express intensity. Sometimes they used the Old English word *swiðe* which has fallen out of use over time. They also used other native English words like *full* or *right*. And the word *right* can still be found as an intensifier in English. In some local dialects, you may hear someone referred to as a 'right good man' or a 'right good woman.' It's just an older way of saying a 'very good man' or a 'very good woman.'

And if a friend is trying to point out someone in a crowd, you might ask say "Where are they?" And the friend might point with emphasis and say "Right there!" Well, again, that's the older use of *right* as an intensifier. We also hear that older use in the title 'Right Honorable' which means the Very Honorable. So *right* was a common intensifier before the adoption of the word *very*. And notice the connection between those two words. Another meaning of the word *right* is correct or true. 'Yes, that's right!' And as I noted, that was also the original sense of the word *very* as well. So you can use either word to express truth as in "That's the very one," or "That's the right one." Or you can use either word to express intensity as in "That's a very good man" or "That's a right good man."

So why did English speakers feel the need to bring the word *very* into the equation at all? Why weren't the existing terms good enough? Well, it was probably because words that are used as intensifiers tend to become dulled with use over time. They're used so often that they tend to become somewhat bland. And when we really want to emphasize something in a special way, we have to look for a new word to express that emphasis or intensity. So today, we might convert 'very bad' into 'awfully bad,' Or we might change 'very good' into 'extremely good.' So we often look around for other ways to express intensity. And that's probably how the word *very* was adopted as an intensifier in the decades after Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales.

But again, when Chaucer described a 'very perfect gentle knight,' he simply meant that the knight was a true, perfect gentleman.

After describing the knight, Chaucer turned to the knight's son – the squire. Chaucer writes:

With him there was his son, a young squire,
A lover and a lusty bachelor;
With curled locks of hair, as if they were laid in press.
Of twenty years of age he was, I guess.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

With hym ther was his sone, a yong Squier,
A lovyere and a lusty bacheler;
With lokkes crulle, as they were leyd in presse.
Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse.

Now I mention this passage because it concludes with the statement, 'I guess' meaning 'I suppose.' At one time, the use of the phrase 'I guess' in this way was considered to be an Americanism. It was very common in early American English and is still common today. And in the 1800s, British commentators often criticized it and ridiculed it as American figure of speech. But here, we can see that Chaucer was actually using it in the late 1300s. So the phrase is actually much older than American English. It just disappeared from common use in England at some point during the intervening centuries.

Chaucer then tells us that the squire wore the latest fashions, played the flute and was an expert horseman.

The knight and squire were also accompanied by a yeoman. He was the knight's servant. We saw in an earlier episode that the word *yeoman* had two different meanings in Middle English. It could refer to a peasant farmer who acquired a bit of wealth through hard work, and it could also refer to the servant of a knight or other noble. Here Chaucer uses it in the latter sense. He tells us that the yeoman had close-cropped hair and carried a large bow and a sword.

Chaucer then tells us that there was a Prioress. A prioress was a superior nun in charge of other nuns in an abbey or convent. So Chaucer's pilgrims included women as well as men. And as a Prioress, this particular woman would have occupied an elevated position within English society during the Middle Ages. Many women in her position came from noble families. And Chaucer's description of her reflects her status and position. He says that she sang the religious services in a manner that was divine. And she spoke French, though it wasn't the proper French of Paris. I've mentioned this quote before, but Chaucer wrote:

And French she spoke full faire and elegantly,
After the school of Stratford-at-Bowe,
for the French of Paris was to her unknown.

And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe,
For Frenssh of Parys was to hir unknowe.

So this is a subtle commentary on the state of French at the time. To speak French elegantly or fluently was a sign of someone from the upper classes – someone who had been raised in an environment where people spoke French or someone who had a received a formal education in French. But when Chaucer says that she couldn't speak the proper French of Paris, we know that she spoke the traditional Anglo-Norman dialect of French which had been spoken in England for three centuries and which was in sharp decline in England in the late 1300s.

And speaking of French, Chaucer makes a very notable shift in his vocabulary when he gets to the Prioress. He peppers his description of her with lots of French loanwords. He says that she was "ful plesaunt" or 'full pleasant' or 'very pleasant' using the French word *pleasant*. He also uses that word *full* as an intensifier. He says that she was "amyable of port" meaning that she had a kindly demeanor using the French words *amiable* and *port*. He adds, "And peyned hir to countrefete cheere of court" – literally 'And pained her to counterfeit cheer of court,' but it meant 'she took pains to imitate the appearance of courtliness.' That line uses the French words *pain*, *counterfeit*, *cheer* and *court*. Chaucer says that the Prioress was also "estatlich of manere" or 'stately of manner' using the French words *stately* and *manner*. And he says that she wanted to be considered "digne of reverence" or 'worthy of reverence' or 'worthy of respect.' That phrase uses the French word *digne* meaning 'worthy' and the French word *reverence*.

All of those French loanwords were used in just four lines of the poem. Out of a total of 27 words, 11 of them were French loanwords. That about 40% of the words.

Now you may be saying 'So what?,' but that percentage is kind of important. In the last episode, I noted that about 15% of the total words used in the Canterbury Tales are French loanwords. That's a relatively low percentage by today's standard, but it was pretty high for the late 1300s. Now again, that's the overall percentage, but it was not consistent throughout the poem. When Chaucer was dealing with characters from the lower classes, he tended to use very few French words. So that percentage fell, and he mainly used words from Old English or sometimes from

Old Norse. But when Chaucer wrote about elevated characters – those from the upper classes – he tended to use lots of French words, so the percentage of those words jumped up.
In that four line description of the Prioress, the percentage of French words jumped from an overall average of 15% to just over 40%. So almost every other word was a French loanword. And almost all of the descriptive words – the adjectives, adverbs and nouns – were loanwords.

Scholars would say that this was Chaucer writing in his high register. He often modified his language and vocabulary when he wanted to express a sense of nobility or high class. And he did that by using lots of those relatively new French loanwords. So his language varied with the class of the person he was describing or with the class of the person who was speaking.

Now I should note here that Chaucer didn't necessarily say to himself, 'Let me use a French word here to sound fancy.' It was probably the other way around. When he wanted to write in an elevated way or in a higher register, he apparently chose words that he considered to be more sophisticated, and in many cases, those words just happened to be French loanwords.

Now after describing the Prioress, Chaucer notes that she was accompanied by a nun and three priests, though he doesn't provide a specific description of them.

Chaucer then turns his attention to a Monk. He paints a vivid picture of the Monk. He is described as an *outrider* which was a monk who would ride out and supervise the estates of the monastery. Despite his role as a monk, he was a thoroughly modern man who loved hunting. He owned horses and greyhounds for the joy of the hunt. He also wore a robe, but it wasn't a cheap monk's robe. It was trimmed with fine fur. And he fastened his hood under his chin with a gold pin. So much for the vow of poverty.

So the Monk didn't quite adhere to the elevated standards of the Prioress. And we get another step down with the next pilgrim – the Friar. A Friar was a member of one of the major religious orders like the Franciscans or Dominicans. Chaucer doesn't specify which order the Friar belonged to. He earned part of living through begging, so he hung around with merchants because that's where the money was. It was much more lucrative than hanging around with lepers and other beggars. He was also a regular guest as the taverns, and he knew the hosts and barmaids. He gave out knives and pins to the 'young wives.' And Chaucer tells us that "Somwhat he lipsed for his wantownesse / To make his Englissh sweete upon his tonge." In other words, he effected a slight lisp to make his English sound sweet upon his tongue. The implication is that it was a way to endear himself to others – especially to the young women, wives, barmaids.

Chaucer then turns away from the various pilgrims associated with the Church, and he describes a Merchant who was among the group. The Merchant had a forked beard and wore a Flemish beaver heat. He bragged about his financial exploits and his huge profits. Chaucer renders the line as "Sownynge alway th'encrees of his wynnyng" – literally 'Sounding always or continually about the increases of his winnings.'

Then Chaucer introduces us to a Clerk from Oxford. He writes:

A Clerk from Oxford was there also,
That had studied logic long ago.
As lean was his horse as is a rake,
And he also was not very fat, I undertake,

A Clerk ther was of Oxenford also,
That unto logyk hadde longe ygo.
As leene was his hors as is a rake,
And he nas nat right fat, I undertake,

You may have noticed that Chaucer used the word *right* as an intensifier there, instead of the more modern word *very*. I talked about that earlier. He wrote that the Clerk was "nat right fat" – 'not right fat' meaning 'not very fat.' This was intended to emphasize the fact that he was poor, perhaps even malnourished. Chaucer goes on to tell us that the Clerk was a poor teacher and scholar at Oxford. His coat was "Ful thredbare" – 'full threadbare.' And he "looked holwe" – 'looked hollow' meaning that he looked very thin. Chaucer tells us that the Clerk wasn't really interested in money or formal positions in the Church or government. He preferred to spend his time reading and studying. He spent his money on books and learning.

Now even though Chaucer used the word *clerk* in a very specific way, the word has a wide variety of meanings today. It can mean a record-keeper or administrative person. In North America, it can also refer to front-desk clerk in a hotel. American English also refers to a sales person in a store as a clerk. But originally, it meant a churchman or clergyman. It's really just a shortened version of the Latin word *cleric*.

In the early Middle Ages, education and literacy was largely confined to the Church and church-schools. So most educated and literate people were clerics – or clerks. So the word *clerk* also acquired a secondary sense as a scholar or educated person, and that's the way Chaucer uses the word here. Since they were educated and literate, clerks were often employed both inside and outside of the Church as scribes and record-keepers. And that led to the more modern sense of the word as an administrator or bookkeeper. And from that association with low-level administrative positions, it was extended in American English to other types of employees like hotel clerks and store clerks.

Now if you're listening to this podcast in Britain, and some other places as well, you may be getting annoyed by my pronunciation of this word as /clurk/ because, in much of Britain, the word is pronounced as /clark/. And the word spelled D-E-R-B-Y is /durby/ in the US, but /darby/ in Britain. So what's the deal with that?

Well, as you might have guessed, the difference is the product of a sound change that took place within England. It's possible that this change was underway during the time of Chaucer, but most scholars think it occurred slightly later in the following century – the 1400s. Chaucer probably pronounced the word *clerk* with its original short 'E' sound – /clairk/. This is the same vowel that still have in the word *cleric*. So if you drop that 'I' in *cleric*, you get /clairk/.

But a short time later, that short 'E' sound started to change when it appeared before an 'R' – especially when the 'R' was followed by another consonant. But the change was not consistent throughout England. In much of southern England – especially around London – 'er' (/air/) became 'ar.' So *clerk* (/clairk/) became /clark/. And *derby* (/dairby/) became /darby/. But in other parts of England, the sound shifted from 'er' (/air/) to 'ur.' So in those places, *clerk* (/clairk/) became /clurk/, and *derby* (/dair-bee/) became /durby/. Then, in the 1600s and 1700s, as people migrated from England to North America, they took those pronunciations with them. But given the migration patterns, the /ur/ pronunciation was more dominant in North America. Meanwhile, the /ar/ pronunciation was the pronunciation of London, so it became more standard in British English. And today, we have American /clurk/ and /durby/ and British /clark/ and /darby/. And to be fair, British English today generally drops that 'R' sound as well, so it's more like /clahk/ and /dahby/.

So if that's the case, why do we have the word *cleric* with the original vowel sound? I mean it's not /cluric/ or /claric/. Well, that's because the word *cleric* was re-borrowed from Latin in the 1600s in its original form. Since the word *clerk* had lost much of its original meaning within English, the word *cleric* was re-borrowed in its original form to fill the gap. When it came in this second time, it came back in with its original vowels – both the E and the I. So it came back in as a two-syllable word. And it also came back in with much of its original meaning as a member of the clergy. So the word *cleric* is the more recent loanword, but it also reflects more of the original form of the word. And the word *clerk* – or /clark/ – is the form of the word that survived the changes of Middle English and still shows the effects of those changes.

Now before I move on, I should note that the regional distinction between /clurk/ and /Durby/ on the one hand, and /clark/ and /darby/ on the other, is not nearly as clean and neat as my discussion may have suggested. American English does actually have the pronunciation of *clerk* as /clark/, but it's only retained as a name like Dick Clark or Clark Kent. The name *Clark* began as an occupational surname from the word *clerk*. So *clerk* and *Clark* are ultimately the same word. American English just uses one version for the occupation (/clurk/) and the other for the occupational surname (/clark/). That's ultimately how American English resolved the difference in pronunciation.

By the way, this same sound change helps to explain the difference between *vermin* and *varmint* which are actually variations of the same word. The sound change also explains the connection between *varsity* and *university*. *University* was sometimes shortened to /versity/ or /varsity/ – depending on the pronunciation. And *varsity* won out over time on both sides of the Atlantic.

So now we know why some of you say /clurk/ and some of you say /clark/. As I noted, Chaucer probably said /clairk/, and after describing his /clairk/, he then turned his attention to another of the pilgrims – the lawyer. Chaucer actually identifies him as a 'Sergeant of Law,' which typically meant a senior barrister belonging to the order whose members often served as judges. In fact, Chaucer says that the lawyer sometimes served as a judge in the King's courts. 'Sergeant of Law' literally meant 'Servant of Law,' and it essentially meant a 'Servant of the King in Matters of Law.' In fact, the words *sergeant* and *servant* are two variations of the same Latin root word which also meant servant. The words became distinct within French when the consonant sound

in the middle shifted from /v/ to /j/. And English borrowed each of them as distinct words. *Servant* came in with a broad sense as any kind of servant, and *sergeant* came in with a more restricted sense. Of course, it could mean a military servant which is often how we use it today, and it could also be used in this sense as a 'Sergeant of the Law.'

But here's the other interesting thing. Between *servant* and *sergeant*, we can hear that same sound change that we just looked at between *clerk* and *clark*. This is another word pair affected by that change. *Servant* retains one pronunciation and *sergeant* retains the other. This also explains why that initial vowel sound in *sergeant* is spelled with an E and not an A. The word is spelled S-E-R-G-E-A-N-T, and that's because that letter E represented a short 'E' sound in early Middle English. But again, that 'E' sound before an R shifted in the century after the Canterbury Tales was written.

Now Chaucer says that his lawyer had a great reputation and took large fees. He handled many real estate deals, and he knew every legal decision that had been decided since the time of William the Conqueror.

Next up was the Franklin. A franklin was a free landholder who was usually quite wealthy. Franklins represented the class of landholders just under the gentry – somewhere between the yeomen and the lesser nobility. They often played a important role in the affairs of the countryside.

The term *franklin* is actually a French loanword, and it's based on the word *Frank* which we've seen many times in the podcast. Of course, it was ultimately derived from the name of the Franks – the Germanic tribe that settled in modern-day France and ultimately were the founders of the modern nation-state of France. The word *frank* is also the root of the words *France* and *French*. And you might remember from earlier episodes that the word *frank* meant 'free' within French because the Franks were given a degree of freedom and autonomy by the Roman Empire when they first settled in the region. And that's how the word *frank* came to be applied to these free landholders in England after the Norman Conquest. These landholders didn't owe personal labor services to a lord, so they were deemed to be free, and as such, they were sometimes called *franklins*. Of course, the word mostly survives today as an occupational surname, for example in the name the American founding father Benjamin Franklin.

After the Franklin, Chaucer tells us that there were five guildsmen representing various London professions. There was a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer, and a tapycer. A *tapycer* was a weaver of tapesteries and rugs and related items. There was also a haberdasher which was a seller of hats or other small wares. This is one of the first recorded uses of the word *haberdasher* in an English document. These guildsmen represented the new wealth of the craftsmen who made up the emerging middle class London. They all wore band new outfits and had knives adorned with silver.

The guildsmen also brought a cook with them. The cook had a taste for London ale and had a bad ulcer on his shin.

There was also a Shipman who ferried cargos of wine across the Channel. But Chaucer tells us that he was not above stealing some of the wine while the traders were sleeping.

Next up was a physician, or as Chaucer describes him, a Doctour of Physik. He is described in very general terms.

Then we have one of Chaucer's most intriguing characters – the Wife of Bath. As her name suggests, she was a wife from the town of Bath. She had a great deal of experience with pilgrimages having been to Jerusalem three times. But that wasn't the only thing she had experience with. Chaucer writes the following:

She was a worthy woman throughout her life,
Husbands at the church door, she had five,
Not counting other company in youth;
But there's no need to speak of that now, in truth.

She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,
Withouthen oother compaignye in youthe,
But therof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.

Now up until this point, Chaucer has given us characters from the Upper Classes and Middle Classes, and even some craftsmen and laborers. But the remaining pilgrims all come from a lower social background. The first of these are a couple of brothers who are true peasants. One of them is a Parson, more accurately described in the poem as a Poor Parson. And he is accompanied by his brother, the Plowman.

The Parson is depicted as an ideal character – poor in worldly goods, but rich in faith. Chaucer writes:

A good man was there of religion,
He was a poor Parson of a town in the countryside,
But rich he was in holy thought and work.
He was also a learned man, a clerk

A good man was ther of religioun,
And was a povre persoun of a toun,
But riche he was of hooly thoght and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk

Chaucer goes on to describe him in glowing and pious terms. And his brother the Plowman is also depicted in similar terms. Chaucer says of the poor Plowman, '...a true worker and good was he, Living in peace and perfect charity.' In the original Middle English, "...a trewe swynkere and a good was he, Lyvynge in pees and parfit charitee."

In the extended descriptions, Chaucer doesn't really have a negative word to say about either of these poor brothers. And you can't help but see a possible influence from Piers Plowman in these characters. As we saw in an earlier episode, the first version of Piers Plowman – the A Text – was composed in the 1360s, a couple of decades before Chaucer began work on the Canterbury Tales. And Piers Plowman depicts an idealized plowman as a Christ-like figure surrounded by a world full of corruption and greed. Well, here we have two peasant brothers – one an idealized Parson and the other a plowman who is reminiscent of Piers Plowman.

There's also another obvious parallel with Piers Plowman. The Prologue of that poem also begins in Springtime, which was common for poetry of this period, and the narrator falls asleep and has a dream vision of a field full of people from all elements of society. He sees plowmen, and merchants, and priests, and various townspeople – including cooks and a sergeant-at-law. He even sees a group of pilgrims. So a lot of the people presented in the Prologue of Piers Plowman are also featured in the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales. Maybe it's all a coincidence, but it seems that Chaucer may have been influenced by that earlier poem.

One other quick note about the poor Parson before we move on. Chaucer rendered the word *parson* as *persoun* – P-E-R-S-O-U-N. So it looks like the word *person*, and in fact, it IS the word *person*. Ultimately, *parson* and *person* are the same word. And once again, we see the same sound change that distinguished *clerk* and *clark* and *servant* and *sergeant*. And here, it distinguished *person* and *parson*. So how did the very generic word *person* evolve into a word for a type of priest?

Well, the first thing to understand is that the word was borrowed from French, and it is ultimately derived from the Latin word *persona*. The next thing to understand is that in the time of Chaucer, a parson was usually the priest of a small independent church. And as the priest, he represented the congregation. And as the religious and legal representative of the congregation, he was the face of that particular church or assembly. He embodied it and personified it. As such, that type of priest was sometimes called the *persona ecclesiae* in Latin. It literally meant the Church Person. And over time, via French, that title simply became *persoun*, and that's the title that Chaucer used in the Canterbury Tales. But again, that vowel change in the 1400s meant that *persoun* became either /person/ or /parson/, depending on what part of England you were in. Over time, *person* acquired the broader sense as a human being, and *parson* acquired the more restricted sense as a priest.

Now having described the Parson and his brother the Plowman, Chaucer turns his attention to the five remaining pilgrims, most of whom are cheats and crooks.

The first of these is the Miller. He is crude and unsophisticated. He is a stout and brawny guy. His has large shoulders and a head so hard he could use it to break down doors by ramming through them head first. He wears a white coat and a blue hood. And perhaps, most importantly, he's a crook. Chaucer writes: "Wel koude he stelen corn, and tollen thries" – 'Well could he steal corn, and toll three times his fee.'

Now this characteristic would have seemed obvious and redundant to any reader in the Middle Ages. Millers were notorious for cheating their customers, and it was pretty much a given that a Miller was a thief. There was even a well-known proverb at the time: "Every honest Miller has a golden thumb." Of course, since no miller actually had a golden thumb, the proverb meant that there were no honest millers. In fact, Chaucer alludes to this proverb in the next line. He says, "And yet he hadde a thombe of gold, pardee." – 'And yet he had a thumb of gold, by God.' The use of the word *pardee* at the end gives away the intended sentiment. *Pardee* was an Anglicized version of the French phrase 'par dieu' – literally 'by God.' It was essentially a curse word. So when Chaucer says that the Miller had a thumb of gold, you have to imagine someone reading that line sarcastically – basically rolling their eyes and saying, "Yeah, he was a real honest guy."

The reason why millers had this bad reputation is because they were paid by taking a share of the grain after it was ground into a fine meal. But there was no way to audit or regulate what the miller took. So millers routinely took more than their fair share. Chaucer writes that his Miller would steal corn and 'tollen thries' – basically take three times the amount he was supposed to take.

Now from a linguistic point of the view, the most fascinating thing about Chaucer's extended description of the Miller is the words he chose to use. He describes the Miller in very basic terms. The words he uses are mostly simple single-syllable words, and they are mostly words pulled from Old English or Old Norse. He uses very few fancy French words.

Remember how Chaucer bumped up the percentage of French words when he was describing the Prioress – an upper class lady with noble features? The percentage of French words jumped from an overall average of 15% up to 40% . She was heavily described with sophisticated French loanwords. But now, in his extended description of the Miller, Chaucer abandons those words. In the description, less than 7% of the words come from French. That's less half of the overall average of 15%. Of 188 words used in the description, only 13 come from French. And even when we look at those 13, most of them are not obvious French words. They are single syllable words that seem like Old English words and may have been considered native English words by this point. They include words like *stout*, *brawn*, *bar*, *tuft*, *coat*, *blue*. None of those words seem fancy or sophisticated. And another one of the 13 French loanwords was that expression *pardee* meaning 'by God!.' So it was actually a curse word.

And one of the other words was *harlotries* – a variation of the word *harlot*, but it meant obscenities. Chaucer said that the Miller could tell a story, but it mostly consisted of sin and harlotries – or obscenities   And we'll get confirmation of that in the next episode when we look at the Miller's Tale. So as we can see, Chaucer shifted into his lower register when he described the Miller. He used mostly simple native words, and when he incorporated a French loanword, it was usually a simple one that resembled a native word, or it was a curse word, or it was a word that had an association with that type of person. So again, Chaucer modified his language to fit the character.

After describing the Miller, Chaucer says that there was also a Manciple. A Manciple was basically a purchasing agent. He was an officer who purchased supplies for someone else – usually a monastery or college or other assembly. In this case, Chaucer refers to "A gentil maunciple was ther of a temple" – 'A gentle manciple was there of a temple.' This specifically refers to a site in London where law students lived and studied. It was located near the royal courts, and so the Manciple was responsible for buying food and other provisions for the lawyers and law students who lived there. Chaucer doesn't have much to say about the Manciple other than the fact that he was clever and always made good financial deals. There's an implication that the deals weren't always above board, but Chaucer never expressly says that.

Then Chaucer turns his attention to the Reeve. The Reeve was basically the manager of a country estate. Chaucer's Reeve was tall and lean with a closely cropped haircut and beard. We are told that his lord was a mere 20 years old, so the Reeve was able to take advantage of the situation. Chaucer writes:

By green trees shaded was his dwelling-place.
Much better than his lord could he purchase.
Full rich was he provided privately,
He knew well how to please his lord subtly

With grene trees shadwed was his place.
He koude bettre than his lord purchace.
Ful riche he was astored pryvely:
His lord wel koude he plesen subtilly

The implication seems clear. The Reeve was doing some shady dealing. He was provided for 'pryvely' – or 'privately' – but it meant secretly. And he knew how to please his lord 'subtly,' so without the lord fully understanding what was going on. Chaucer also gives us two other bits of information about the Reeve that will become important later on. First, he had been trained as a carpenter in his youth, and second, he was from Norfolk in the east of England. That information will become important when the Miller tells a bawdy tale about a carpenter. The Reeve takes offence since he was a carpenter by training, and in response, he tells a bawdy story about a Miller. So the Miller's Tale and the Reeve's Tale have similar tones, and they both go together. And again, I'm going to look at those tales in the next episode.

The Reeve's Tale is also important to language historians because it features two students from the north of England, and Chaucer writes their dialogue using a Northern dialect. But what often gets overlooked about the Reeve's Tale is that Chaucer gives the Reeve a Norfolk dialect as well. And that's why it is notable that Chaucer points out here that the Reeve is from Norfolk.

Now after the Reeve, Chaucer turned his attention to the Summoner. The Summoner was a person who served summonses or writs compelling people to attend the church courts. You might remember that the Church had its own separate court system to deal with religious offenses like witchcraft, adultery, usury, and so on. The Summoner delivered the papers that required a person to attend a session of the court, and he would act as an usher during the court session.

Chaucer's Summoner had an intimidating and scary appearance. Children were afraid of him. Chaucer writes, "Of his visage children were aferd." He was prone to getting drunk on wine and raving like a madman. And when that happened, he only spoke in Latin, even though he only knew a few random Latin phrases that he often heard in court. And Chaucer tells us that he could be easily bribed with a quart of wine.

The final pilgrim presented by Chaucer is the Pardoner. As his title implies, the Pardoner sold pardons, specifically religious pardons. As I've noted in prior episodes, the Christian Church of the Middle Ages raised money by selling pardons and indulgences. It was basically a way for the Church to raise money, but it was also a way for people with money to buy their way out of sin and to buy their way into heaven. It was a controversial practice even at the time. William Langland criticized it in Piers Plowman, and John Wyclif railed against it. And here, Chaucer takes his shots as well.

He tells us that the Pardoner had just arrived from Rome. He wrote:

His knapsack lay before him in his lap,
Stuffed full with pardons brought from Rome all hot.

His walet lay biforn hym in his lappe
Bretful of pardoun come from Rome al hoot.

But the Pardoner's fraud extended well beyond the sale of indulgences. He also carried with him various common items which he claimed were holy relics. He had a pillowcase which he claimed the Virgin Mary's veil, and he had some pig's bones in a glass. He made a killing selling these supposed relics. All he had to do was find was a local church and sell the items to the gullible congregation. Chaucer writes:

But with these relics, whenever he found
Some simple parson's dwelling in the country,
In just one day, he took in more money
Than the parson made in two months.

But with thise relikes, whan that he fond
A povre persoun dwellyng upon lond,
Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;

So Chaucer concludes his list of pilgrims with a series of dishonest pilgrims, with one of the most corrupt bringing up the rear.

Now if you were paying really close attention as I went through those various pilgrims, you may have noticed a discrepancy. Chaucer began by saying that there were 'nine and twenty' – or 29 – pilgrims. But if you count each of the pilgrims mentioned by Chaucer, there were actually 30 of them. Now this isn't really a big deal, but it shows that the Canterbury Tales was still a work in

progress when Chaucer died. We have to assume that he would have corrected that error if he had ever gotten around to putting all the fragments into a final manuscript.

Now after describing the various pilgrims gathered together at the Tabard Inn, Chaucer tells us that the host of the inn provided them with food and wine and entertainment. We later find out in the Cook's Tale that the name of the host is Harry Bailey. And believe it or not, there really was a Harry Bailey who was an innkeeper in Southwark during this period. This is proven by multiple surviving records. So it appears that the character was actually based on a real person. And it also implies that some of the other characters may have also been based on actual people who Chaucer knew.

At any rate, the host Harry Bailey addresses the gathered pilgrims, and he proposes a contest. He says:

What I say is true, for I shall not lie,
I have not seen, this year, so merry a company
Here in this inn as is gathered here now.
I'd make you happy with mirth, if I knew how.
And of a game, I have right now thought of something
To give you joy, and it shall cost you nothing.

For by my trouthe, if that I shal nat lye,
I saugh nat this yeer so myrie a compaignye
Atones in this herberwe, as is now.
Fayn wolde I doon yow myrthe, wiste I how.
And of a myrthe I am right now bythoght,
To doon yow ese, and it shal coste noght.

The game proposed by Harry Bailey is a story-telling contest. Each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two stories on the way back. Harry says that he will join the pilgrims to act as a guide and judge. And whoever proves to be the best story-teller will receive a free meal at the inn when they all return from their pilgrimage.

They all agree to the terms, and this sets the stage for the pilgrimage and stories to come. They all retire to their beds for the evening to get a good night's rest before departing the next morning. This concludes the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales.

Now I should note that the rules proposed by the host and agreed to by the pilgrims present another discrepancy. Supposedly, each pilgrim was to tell two tales each way. That's four tales each. And there were 30 pilgrims. So that meant that Chaucer had to come up with 120 different stories. Well, he never did that. He actually only wrote 24 tales, and two of those were left unfinished. So in the final version of the book, the pilgrims were limited to one tale, and some of them didn't even get to tell a tale. So Chaucer's grand plan was scaled back significantly, but the General Prologue was never changed to fit that revised plan.

Before I conclude, I should also make one other important observation about Chaucer's pilgrims. I've said a few times that they represent a cross-section of English society. And that is true. But a closer look reveals that most of them are actually from the middle strata of English society. At the upper end of the scale, we have a Knight and a Prioress who may have had a noble background, but otherwise, we don't really have any other members of the nobility. And at the other end of the scale, we have a Plowman and his poor Parson brother, but that's it when it comes to the traditional rural peasant class. By and large, what we have are professionals, and businessmen and craftsmen. We have a doctor, a lawyer, a merchant, a franklin, and shipman, a miller, a reeve and various guild members. These were the people of the emerging middle class of England that had been largely ignored in the literature prior to this point. But as we've seen before, by the late 1300s, they had become a powerful force within England largely due to the breakdown of the feudal system. And as I've noted before, these people came from the traditional English-speaking classes, and their rise occurred in conjunction with the rise of their language – English. And since this class of people had a high degree of literacy, they also came to demand books. And not just any books, but books composed in English. And of course, they would have been especially intrigued to read about themselves and the people they knew. So that may help to explain why the Canterbury Tales found such a receptive audience in the years after it was produced. It many respects, it was written 'about' the emerging middle class of England, and it written 'for' them as well. And that was really a unique approach to English literature in the late Middle Ages.

So with that, I'm going to conclude this episode. Next time, we'll conclude our look at the Canterbury Tales by explore a couple of the actual tales – the Miller's Tale and Reeve's Tale. As I noted earlier, these tales present the bawdy side of Chaucer. So the next episode will be a little different. It'll be a little risqué, a little naughty, a little crude, and lot of fun.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.

EPISODE 129: CHAUCER'S VULGAR TONGUE

[This episode contains a frank discussion of vulgarities, obscenities, profanity, sexual hijinks, and flatulence. So fair warning.]

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 129: Chaucer's Vulgar Tongue. In this episode, we're going to look at the vulgar side of Geoffrey Chaucer. And when I say *vulgar*, I mean it in both the modern sense of the word and the original sense of the word. *Vulgar* originally meant common or ordinary, and Chaucer was one of the few English writers of the Middle Ages to paint vivid portraits of the common people of England. And those portraits included their language – the common language of common people. Chaucer's ordinary characters curse and swear, and they tell stories that many people would consider dirty or obscene. It's a side of the English language that we don't see very often in the Middle Ages, and it's partly how the word *vulgar* evolved from its original sense of 'common or ordinary' to its more modern sense of 'dirty, inappropriate or unrefined.' So this time, we'll examine how Chaucer used his vulgar tongue to depict his common and ordinary characters in the Canterbury Tales.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now a quick note before we begin. In this episode, I'm going to discuss the history of certain obscenities and curse words in English. So if you're sensitive to foul language, be aware that we will be looking at some of those words in the episode. Also, I'm going to explore this topic in the context of the Miller's Tale as set forth in the Canterbury Tales. I had originally intended to include the Reeve's Tale in this discussion as well, but due to time considerations, I've decided to move the Reeve's Tale to the next episode where I also intend to discuss Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Those two stories actually have one very important thing in common. They both illustrate the nature of English in the north of England in the late 1300s. So I'll cover those two stories next time.

But for now, let's turn our attention back to the bawdy side of Chaucer and his fascination with the more vulgar aspects of English. Before we began our look at the Canterbury Tales, we briefly looked at another one of Chaucer's important poems called Troilus and Criseyde about two lovers during the time of the Trojan War. There's a scene in that poem where Troilus tries to convince Criseyde to run away with him. He tells her that if he can speak plainly about treasure or money, they have enough to live together comfortably for the rest of their lives. The line begins with the passage 'And vulgarly to speken of substaunce of tresour' – 'And vulgarly to speak of substance of treasure,' but it meant 'to speak plainly or bluntly about money.'

Now notice that Troilus didn't say that money was obscene, and he didn't use any curse words in the passage. When he said that he was speaking 'vulgarly,' he simply meant that he was speaking in the common or ordinary way that someone would speak about money. In other words, to speak 'vulgarly' was to speak plainly or bluntly. And that's because the word *vulgar* actually meant

'common or ordinary.' It is a loanword from Latin, and according to the Oxford English dictionary, this passage uttered by Troilus is the first known use of the word *vulgar* – or a form of the word v*ulgar* – in the English language.

This sense of the word *vulgar* as 'common or ordinary' is the same sense that we have in the term Vulgar Latin. Many language historians refer to the Vulgar Latin dialects that were spoken in Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. Those dialects ultimately produced French, Spanish, Portugese, Italian and the other Romance languages. Now when scholars refer to these Latin dialects as 'vulgar,' they don't mean that the dialects were crude or dirty. They simply mean that those were the Latin dialects spoken by the common or ordinary people in the various parts of Western Europe, as opposed to the formal Latin used by the Church.

The point is that the word *vulgar* has always been used to make this basic connection between ordinary people and ordinary speech. But the modern sense of the word *vulgar* points to something else. It shows us that common, ordinary people often speak in ways that can be blunt and coarse. They don't always use the formal rules of language taught in schoolbooks. And they sometimes use words that aren't found in those schoolbooks, and sometimes aren't even found in dictionaries.

It is probably fitting that Geoffrey Chaucer was the first known English writer to use the word *vulgar* because he was also one of the first English writers to explore that basic connection between the common people and their common language.

As we saw last time, Chaucer sometimes wrote in a high register when writing about noble characters or elevated topics. But he also wrote in a lower register when writing about common, ordinary people, especially peasants and people who were 'rough around the edges' – the type of people who Chaucer and some modern speakers would call *churls*.

Words like *vulgar* and *churl* reflect this old idea that the common people tend to speak and behave in ways that are crude and unrefined. As I noted, *vulgar* originally meant common, and now it means inappropriate or obscene. *Churl* originally meant a common person. Now it means a rude or unpleasant person. *Villein* was originally a feudal term for a peasant, Now, with a slightly different spelling, it means an evil person or a criminal. And as we've seen before, the word *lewd* originally referred to common things in the secular word. It was often used to refer to common people who were not part of the clergy. But again, the word *lewd* has experienced this same decline over the centuries. Today it means vile, lustful or obscene.

We see the same development in the word *profane* which I also discussed in an earlier episode. The word *profane* is derived from the Latin words *pro* and *fanum*. *Pro* meant 'in front of,' and *fanum* meant 'temple.' So when those two elements were put together, it literally referred to things in front of the temple, but that also inherently meant that those things were outside of the temple. Again, it simply referred to common things in the secular world, as opposed to the Church. But over time, it came to refer to things that were not appropriate for the Church, so it came to mean dirty or vulgar. All of these words – *profane*, *lewd* and *vulgar* – have experienced this same evolution from common to obscene.

And this is an important reminder that words tend to change their meanings over time. When we use words today that are considered vulgar or dirty, we should keep in mind that those words didn't necessarily have that same sense in earlier centuries. Very often, they were just common ordinary words with common ordinary meanings.

A good example of this is one of our modern four-letter words for excrement – the word *shit*. It's a very old word that was used by the Anglo-Saxons, and it probably goes all the way back to the original Indo-Europeans. The original Indo-European root word was something like **skei*, and it apparently meant 'to separate or divide.' That meaning included situations where something was cut off or removed or separated from a larger object. Since bodily waste was removed from the body through defecation, this old root word was applied to that process.

The same root word was applied to the process of removing objects from the outside of the body as well – like clothing. To remove clothing or other objects from the body was to 'shed' them from the same root word. Of course, it could also apply to skin as when a snake 'sheds' its skin. The same root word was also applied the process of removing wool from a sheep. In that case, it produced the word 'shear.'

Sometimes ancient people would split a large tree trunk in half, and then they would hollow it out to create a boat or sailing vessel. This process of division and separation and removal of wood waste created the word *ship* from the same root. Sometimes, a flat piece of wood cut from a tree was used as a roof covering. That piece of wood was called a *shingle* also from the same root.

So *shit*, *shed*, *shear*, *ship* and *shingle* are all cognate according to language scholars. They all evolved from the same root word meaning 'to split or divide.' And all of the examples I just gave are words that were used in Old English.

In the case of our common four-letter word for excrement, it is older than English itself. The word was used in that same sense during the earlier Proto-Germanic period, and scholars know that because other modern Germanic languages have their own verison of that word with essentially the same meaning. For example, Modern German has the word as *Scheisse*, and some English-speakers actually use than German version of the word in place of the English word. It is close enough to the English word that most people recognize it, but it doesn't have the same taboo as the English word.

By the way, some scholars think that the German word *Scheisse* is actually the source of the modern word *shyster*. *Shyster* means a crook or a cheat, and it appeared in English in the 1800s. Some linguists think it came from a German word meaning a 'worthless person,' which itself was derived from *Scheisse*.

So English is not unique in having a version of this word. The English version is very old going all the way back to the Anglo-Saxons. But that's not to say that the meaning has remained the same over all those years. While the word has always referred to dung or excrement, it originally has a much more restricted sense. In Old English, it was limited to the waste created by farm

animals, and more specifically, it usually referred to diarrhoea in cattle or sheep. And it wasn't really an obscene word at the time. In fact, Geoffrey Chaucer used it in the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales.

In his description of the Parson, he says that the Parson was a true man of God, and not corrupt like some members of the clergy. He then chastises corrupt priests with the following passage:

And shame it is, if a prest take keep,
A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep.

In Modern English, it reads:

And shame it is, if a priest takes keep,
A shitty shepherd, looking after clean sheep.

This passage is generally interpreted to mean that a corrupt priest is basically a 'dirty shepherd' looking after his congregation who are the 'clean sheep.' So in this passage, the word *shiten* is used literally to mean a sheep covered with dung or excrement. It's really just a descriptive term meaning 'filthy or dirty.' The word didn't become truly obscene in its modern sense until the 1800s. So at this earlier point, it was still a common descriptive term.

By the way, there is another popular etymology for the word that has traveled far and wide in the age of the internet. The story goes that ships often transported animal manure to be used as fertilizer, and if the manure was stored in the bottom of the ship, water could seep in causing fermentation and methane gas. And that could cause the ship to explode, so the bundles of manure were stamped with a warning that read "Ship High In Transit,' and that warning was supposedly reduced to the initials S-H-I-T. So according to this story, the word is really an acronym. But as we've seen, the word is much older than this story would suggest, and there's no actual evidence to support this story. No one has ever found any references to that type of warning used on ships. And furthermore, acronyms didn't really exist until the past century or so. They are very much a product of the modern era, so old words that have been around for along time are almost never the result of an acronym.

Now as I noted, the word *shit* was originally a common descriptive term for animal feces, and it wasn't necessarily vulgar, but during the Middle English period, it did acquire an association with vulgar speech. In an earlier episode, we looked at a poem called 'The Owl and the Nightingale.' And in that poem, the author used the term 'shit worde' for vulgar or coarse language. Again, the word *shit* itself wasn't really obscene, but it was used to coin a term for obscene words. That poem also used the term 'fule worde' – or 'foul word.' Again, both of those terms implied that the words in question were dirty or foul, and therefore not appropriate for polite society.

So what kind of words were considered foul or dirty or inappropriate? Well, generally speaking, the most taboo words in the Middle Ages were swears and curses, but not *swearing* and *cursing* in the modern sense of those terms. People were far more concerned about language that tended

to offend God or challenge the teachings of the Church. That type of language tended to be more offensive than words for body parts or bodily functions.

Swear is an Old English word, but in Old English, it meant to declare that something was true, usually on a holy relic or other sacred item. That is very similar to what happens today if you swear an oath in court. You might put your hands on the Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Well, that was a far more common act in the Middle Ages. It was the way society was regulated. The entire feudal system was held together by lords and vassals swearing oaths to each other. Husbands and wives were bound together by oaths. Written contracts were rare, so most business agreements were confirmed with a similar exchange. Medieval society depended on sworn promises and oaths. And those oaths didn't really mean anything unless they were sworn in the name God, meaning that the person risked divine retribution if the oath was broken.

But sometimes, people would swear to something that was untrue. So they would make a false oath, thereby challenging and ridiculing the power of God. And sometimes, people would make a mockery of the oath, taking the name of God in vain. And they would even swear on the body, or blood or nails of Christ. That invoked the Crucifixion, and it was widely believed that such phrases literally inflicted pain and suffering on Christ. So that type of language was highly offensive, and that's how the word *swear* came to be used the more modern sense of profanity.

By way of example, it was common in the Middle English period for people to utter phrases like 'by God!' or 'by God's bones!' or 'by God's nails!' Those were similar to the more modern expression 'For God's sake!' In all of those cases, the form of the phrase was an oath, but it was being used as an expletive, so it violated the commandment against taking the Lord's name in vain.

Some of these early swears still survive in disguised forms in Modern English. The word *blimey* is apparently derived from the longer phrase 'God blind me!' which was once a common swear. The word *drat* is derived from the phrase 'God rot' as in 'God rot your bones' or some other body part. Over time, 'God rot' was slurred and shortened into *drat*. The expression *Gadzooks!* began as the phrase 'By God's hooks!' And *By George* began as 'By St. George!' At one time, a lot of people used the word *Zounds!* It was a shortening of the phrase 'By God's wounds!'

This was the usual type of swearing in the Middle Ages, and it was the type that Chaucer used throughout his poetry. He was a very active swearer in this regard, and his characters often speak in that way. But in the Canterbury Tales, the elevated or noble characters rarely swear. Most of the swearing comes from the common ordinary characters who tend to come from the lower classes.

The innkeeper and host Harry Bailey is one of the biggest offenders. At one point, he even gets into an argument with the Parson over his language. When he invites the Parson to tell his tale, he says, "for Goddes bones, Telle us a tale" – 'for God's bones, tell us a tale.' The parson responds sharply, ""What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?" – 'What ails the man so sinfully to swear?"

Later in the poem, the Pardoner provides a sermon on swearing. In one passage he says:

Of swearing says the holy Jeremiah,
"Thou shalt say truthful oaths, and not lie,
Swear in judgment and in righteousness";
But idle swearing is a cursed-ness.

Of sweryng seith the hooly Jeremye,
"Thou shalt seye sooth thyne othes, and nat lye,
And swere in doom, and eek in rightwisnesse";
But ydel sweryng is a cursednesse.

So again, that last line is 'idle swearing is a cursedness' which meant 'wickedness.' That's how the term *swearing* became associated with bad language. And when he says that swearing is a 'cursedness,' he is alluding to another term that has acquired the same meaning over time – the word *curse*.

Again, *curse* is an Old English word, and it originally meant a statement intended to bring about pain or suffering or an evil fate. So it's the same sense we have today when someone places a curse on someone else. So a curse was in effect a call to God to inflict some type of harm on another person. Some of these curses from the 1500s and 1600s still survive in the language. You might hear people use phrases like "Go to Hell," "To Hell with You." Another common swear is "Goddamn" which began as the longer phrase "God damn me" or "God damn you."

Again, these were all types of curses, and even during the Old English period, the word *curse* could be used to refer to someone who was speaking profanely or using blasphemous words. And of course, we still refer to swear words or obscenities as 'curse words.'

Now in early American English in the 1700s, the 'r' sound was sometimes dropped when it appeared before an 's' sound. And so a word like *curse* became *cuss* in American English. And that's why many Americans still refer to these types of words as 'cuss words.' By the way, the same change converted the word *arse* in *ass*, but I'll have more to say about that later in the episode.

So traditionally, words like *profanity*, *swear* and *curse* were associated with blasphemous statements – statements invoking the name of God or violating the teachings of the Church. But in the early Modern English period, these terms started to acquire broader meanings. They came to refer to other types of words – words referring to people's private parts and bodily functions and sexual activities. And that change was part of a much broader change involving the use of obscenities. As the Middle Ages gave way to the early Modern era, people became a little less concerned about swearing to God, and they became much more concerned about those words associated with the human body and the things that people do in private. And there are some interesting theories about why that happened.

First, some scholars believe that traditional swearing and profanity faded with the decline of the feudal system. As I noted earlier, the entire feudal system was based on lord-vassal relationships which were bound together by verbal oaths sworn to God. So swearing an oath was a really big deal, and it was taken very seriously. But when the feudal system declined, and people started to negotiate for their labor services, those old feudal oaths lost much of their relevance. So oath swearing became less important, and the taboo against false swearing declined.

There's also an interesting theory about the increased stigma associated with body parts, and bodily functions and sexual activities. According to some scholars, these words became much more obscene in the early modern period thanks a technological innovation that started to become common around the current point in our overall story in the 1300s. That innovation was the fireplace and chimney. This is the theory advocated by Melissa Mohr in her book called "Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing."

The theory goes like this. Up to this point in history, people lived much more communally. There wasn't much privacy. Anglo-Saxon society was centered on the hall which was typically a large room with a fire in the middle. Everyone gathered around the fire in the hall, and in that large room, they ate and entertained each other and laid down to sleep at night. That type of communal living was still common in the late Middle Ages. Even as people moved into small houses, most of those houses still only had one or two rooms. So people continued to live together. They routinely saw each other in various states of undress. And it was still common for people to urinate and defecate out in the open in common areas. And when people went to sleep at night, they often shared the room with others, so it was much more common to see people sleeping together and even having sex. By most accounts, these were routine matters in the Middle Ages. They weren't scandalous, and therefore words associated with those activities weren't really considered all that taboo or dirty.

But in the early 1300s, fireplaces were developed that could contain the heat of a roaring fire without collapsing or falling down. These fireplaces and chimneys could be easily constructed. And that allowed the fire to move from the center of the room to the walls. And it also allowed people to divide a large common room into smaller separate rooms. Each of those separate rooms could be heated with a fireplace. That process allowed people to have a separate bedroom and even a separate room with chamber pot or bucket to use as a bathroom. Those changes gave people a greater sense of privacy. In fact, the word *private* was borrowed from Latin during this period. It is recorded for the first time in English in the late 1300s around the time that Chaucer was working on the Canterbury Tales. The Latin root word that gave us the word *private* also gave us the word *privy* for a bathroom. That word also appeared in English the 1200s and 1300s.

Through this process, private parts became private. Bodily functions were more concealed. And sex was hidden behind closed doors. All of that meant that those things were less seen in public, and therefore less talked about in public. And over the centuries, words associated with those private activities became more taboo and were considered to be obscene.

Now, that's an interesting theory, and there's probably a large amount of truth to it, but the fact is that people were uncomfortable with private parts, and bodily functions and sexual intercourse even during the time of Chaucer. Those things may not have been as taboo as today, but when we read the Canterbury Tales, the characters don't really seem all that different from us. They share a lot of our modern attitudes and sensibilities when it comes to farting, and burping, and peeing and pooping and having sex.

And there is no better example of that than one of the most popular stories in the Canterbury Tales – the tale told by the drunken Miller. It's a bawdy and humorous story, and it shows that people were fascinated by potty humor and sexual romps even in the 1300s. The stories were entertaining because the subject matter was considered a bit scandalous even at the time.

This type of story was based on a literary style that had been very popular in France in the 1100s and 1200s. During that period, French poets routinely composed humorous tales involving sexual escapades or bodily functions, and they often culminated with one character getting revenge on another character through some type of trick or joke. They almost always involved common people in common, everyday settings like a house or barn or street. And in that regard, they are sometimes considered to be aristocratic in nature because they often depict common ordinary people as crude and uncivilized. So in that sense, they provide another link between the traditional sense of *vulgar*, as something associated with the common people, and the more modern sense of *vulgar*, as something crude or crass or dirty.

Interestingly, these types of stories were never really popular in English. Of course, English wasn't being used very much as a literary language when these stories were popular in France in the 1100s and 1200s. But Chaucer apparently enjoyed the style, and his examples in the Canterbury Tales are some of the very few examples found in English in the Middle Ages.

Now the French word for this type of story was a *fabliau*, and Chaucer adopted this style for several stories in the Canterbury Tales, but the most-well known is probably the Miller's Tale. It's the second story in the collection, and it immediately follows the tale told by the Knight. And in fact, it is told in direct response to the Knight's Tale.

Chaucer juxtaposes these two tales right after General Prologue that opens the book. And they illustrate the stark contrast in his writing style. Both stories have a similar theme. They both involve a woman being pursued by two potential lovers, but the Knight's Tale is written in Chaucer's high register. It's an elevated courtly poem featuring traditional notions of medieval romance. It uses a lot of French and Latin loanwords, and it's actually based on a story that had been around in courtly circles for some time. Chaucer's version appears to be an abbreviated version of the story as told by the Italian poet Boccaccio several years earlier. As we've seen before, Chaucer was strongly influenced by Boccaccio.

Despite the elevated approach of the Knight's Tale, it is immediately followed by the bawdy story told by the drunken Miller. His story has a similar theme, but it is written from the opposite perspective. It relies mostly on plain speech and a very high percentage of native English words. It has relatively few loanwords. And it also uses language that is more colloquial and coarse,

including words that were probably risqué at the time. They were words not typically used in polite society or the royal court, but apparently they were quite common among drunken millers, and by implication, they were also common among the ordinary people on the streets and on the farms.

Since the Miller's Tale is told in response to the Knight's Tale, let me give you a quick summary of the story told by the Knight. In ancient Greece, two soldiers are captured in battle by the ruler of Athens, and they're taken back to Athens where they are held in a tower. The men are cousins named Palamon and Arcite. One day, they see a beautiful woman named Emelye, and they both fall in love with her, but since they are being held captive, their love is in vain. Arcite is eventually released and allowed to return home. The only condition is that he can never return to Athens. But his misses Emelye so much, that he risks death and returns to Athens in disguise. Meanwhile, Palamon escapes from the tower. With both men now on the loose in Athens, they soon run into each other and begin fighting over their love of Emelye. The Athenian ruler discovers them, but rather than killing them both on the spot, he allows them to battle each other for Emelye's hand in marriage. During the battle, Arcite defeats Palamon and wins the right to marry Emelye. But immediately after the victory, his horse throws him to the ground and he dies. Both Palamon and Emelye weep and mourn Arcite's death, and after several years, the Athenian ruler finally relents, and lets them marry each other. And they both live happily ever after.

So that's the gist of the Knight's Tale. It a classic piece of courtly romance – the type that would have been told by a knight at a royal court in the 1300s. After telling the story, Chaucer tells us that all the pilgrims agreed that it was 'noble storie.' The next tale was to be told by the Monk – who was next in line in the social rank, but the Miller steps forward and objects. The Miller is drunk, and he says that he a 'noble tale' of his own. Chaucer writes:

And "By the arms and blood and bones," he swore,
I know a noble tale for the occasion."

And swoor, "By armes and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones."

So the Miller begins by swearing – in the medieval sense of swearing. He swears 'by the arms and blood and bones' of Christ. Again, this language is very different from that of the Knight who had just completed his noble tale.

And when the Miller says that has a 'noble tale' of his own, that comment is a bit tongue-in-cheek because, as we will soon find out, the tale is anything but 'noble.'

The Miller is allowed to proceed, even though it isn't his turn. But before recounting the tale, Chaucer issues a warning to his readers. He says that the Miller "tolde his cherles tale in his manere" – 'told his churl's tale in his own manner' – or 'in his own way." So Chaucer admits that this is 'churl's tale.' By this point in time, the word *churl* was already being used to mean a rude or unpleasant person, so this was the story of a rude or unpleasant person told in the manner of that person.

Chaucer then begs the reader not to hold the words against him because he is merely recounting the story as he heard it. And if the reader finds the matter to be offensive, Chaucer offers the following advice – first in Modern English:

Turn over the leaf or page and choose another tale,
For you shall find enough, both great and small,
Of stories that touch on gentility,
And holiness, and on morality;
And blame me not if you choose to go amiss.
The miller was a churl, you well know this;
So was the reeve, and many others too,
And obscenities and harlotries were told by the two.
Make up your minds, and hold me free from blame;
And besides, men should not take seriously the playing of games.

Turne over the leef, and chese another tale,
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee, and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys;
The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this,
So was the Reve, and othere manye mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame,
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.

So Chaucer says he is not to blame for the 'harlotries' conveyed in the following tales. As I noted in the last episode, *harlotries* meant behavior that was considered obscene or crude. And he advises readers who might be offended to 'turne over the leef' or 'turn over the page' and find another story that's more suitable. This is interesting because it shows that Chaucer was composing poetry that was intended to be read. Up until this point, most poetry was still being recited openly in a public performance. But here, Chaucer acknowledges that most consumers of his poetry would be reading it in a book, and therefore, they were free to turn the page if they found something objectionable. This points to the growth of the bookmaking industry during this period, and it also is another example of how society was becoming more private as I noted earlier. Public performances of poetry were gradually being replaced with private readings.

With that, Chaucer begins the Miller's Tale. The tale begins with a wealthy old carpenter named John. He lived in Oxford, and he rented out a room in his house to local students at the university. The current tenant was a poor student named Nicholas. Young Nicholas studied astrology and astronomy, and by observing the skies, he could forecast the weather and predict when it would rain. He was also skilled in the art of love.

And this brings us to the old carpenter's wife who was anything but old. She was a mere 18 years old. Her name was Alison, and the old carpenter was jealous of any man who approached her, so he kept her close and didn't give her any freedom. The Miller says, "For she was wylde and yong, and he was old" – 'for she was wild and young, and he was old.' The Miller says that young Alison was very attractive and she loved to sing and dance. And one day, while the old carpenter was out of town, the young student Nicholas made his move. The Miller says:

Now, sir, and then, sir, so befell the case,
That on a day this clever Nicholas
Fell in with this young wife to flirt and play,
While her husband was down Osney way,
As clerks are crafty and fully quaint;
And in private, he caught her by the quaint,
And said: "Indeed, but if I have my will,
For secret love of you, sweetheart, I will spill."
And held her hard by her haunches!
And said: "O darling, love me at once."

Now, sire, and eft, sire, so bifel the cas,
That on a day this hende Nicholas
Fil with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye,
Whil that her housbonde was at Oseneye,
As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte;
And prively he caughte hire by the queynte,
And seyde, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille."
And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones,
And seyde, "Lemman, love me al atones,

Now this passage is quite explicit for the Middle Ages, but there's one word in particular that stands out as part of our overall discussion about vulgar language. It's the part where Nicholas catches Alison "by the queynte." Now this is a play on words which would have been very obvious in the time of Chaucer, but a little less obvious today. This is actually the original form of the word 'quaint' – spelled Q-U-A-I-N-T today.

Now today, *quaint* typically refers to something pleasing, and usually something a bit old-fashioned, but originally it meant clever or crafty or something made in a clever or crafty way. So it also had a sense of something that was intricate or elegant. The word was applied to certain things at the time, like certain styles of dress, that later passed out of fashion. So over time, the word has acquired that sense of something nice and pleasant, but a bit old-fashioned. But again, that's a modern development. When Chaucer and other writers of this period used the word, it still had its original sense as something clever or crafty or intricate or elegant.

When Chaucer used the word in this passage, he actually used it twice so that it rhymes with itself. Now today, if we're writing poetry, we don't normally rhyme a word with itself, but at the time, it was perfectly acceptable to do that as long as each use relied on a different sense of the word. So in the first line, the Miller says, "As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte" – literally 'As clerks be full subtile and full quaint.' So he is saying Nicholas the clerk was very subtile and very 'quaint' in the original sense of the word as 'crafty or clever.' He was a clever clerk. But then in the next line, he says, "And prively he caughte hire by the queynte," – "And privately or sevretly, he caught her by the quaint." Now in this line, the word *quaint* is being used in that other sense as an intricate or elegant object, but it is also obviously a disguised reference to a certain word for a woman's private parts. 'Caught her by the quaint' clearly means 'caught her by the cunt.' But again, it's slightly disguised here, and it's made more acceptable by using the word *quaint*.

Now in case you're not convinced by that connection, Chaucer makes this same reference in another part of the Canterbury Tales in the Prologue to the tale told by the Wife of Bath. She has a very explicit prologue where she talks about her five husbands, and she makes several references to her genitalia using this word *quaint*, as well as the French term *bele chose* which literally meant 'pretty thing.' And Chaucer wasn't the only poet to use the word *quaint* in this way. Other writers during this period also used it that way, so much so that the Oxford English Dictionary actually includes 'female genitals' as an early and now obsolete definition of the word *quaint*. And this is good example of how poets and writers got around the taboo associated with some of these words. And it implies that the word *cunt* was considered to be obscene even in the 1300s. But was it?

Well, this points to one of the challenges in trying to trace the history of swearing and obscenities. If the words were truly obscene, they didn't tend to be used very much in the surviving literature. So the general absence of these words can be interpreted as a sign that the words were obscene, but it could also be the case that the words were simply unknown or not common in the language at time. So when one of these words pops up in the literature, we have to look at the context to see if it was considered obscene, and if so, how obscene was it?

Passages like this from the Miller's Tale suggest that the word *cunt* was obscene at the time because Chaucer didn't actually use the word. He only makes a disguised referenced to it. And he has already warned us that the tale has strong language and adult themes. So he could have used the word if it was generally acceptable at the time.

I actually gave another piece of evidence to support this view in an earlier episode. You might remember that the word *countess* was one of the first words borrowed from French after the Norman Conquest. But you might also remember that the English nobility avoided the male equivalent which was *count*. Instead, they retained the native English title of *earl*. So instead of 'counts and countesses,' England had 'earls and countesses.' And I mentioned in that earlier episode that some scholars think that happened because the word *count* closely resembled the word *cunt*. Both words would have been pronounced very similarly during that time period. And prominent nobles may have refused that French title because it so closely resembled an English word that was considered vulgar or obscene.

Again, that's just a theory, but if its true, it's further evidence of the stigma associated with the word *cunt*. But there is also contrary evidence which suggests that the word was relatively common in the language, and it wasn't really considered all that vulgar. Before examining the conflicting evidence, let's consider what we know about the origin of the word. Frankly, the ultimate origin is unclear. Other Germanic languages have a very similar word with essentially the same meaning, so it is generally believed that the word goes back to the early Proto-Germanic speakers on the continent. There are some suggestions that it may have Indo-European roots because Latin had the word *cunnus* with a similar meaning and similar taboo. That word actually gave us the word *cunnilingus*. But most scholars today doubt that the Latin and English words are related, despite the fact that they are so similar in sound and meaning.

Though the word *cunt* appears to have Germanic origins, it isn't found in any Old English documents. That may be because it was in the language, but it was considered so obscene that the Anglo-Saxon scribes didn't use it. Of course, another possibility is that the word disappeared from Old English altogether. At any rate, the word appears for the first time in writing in the 1200s, and that may be because it was reintroduced by the Vikings. Old Norse had essentially the same word which was *kunta*. It's possible that the Norse version of the word was borrowed into English without the same taboo as the native version of the word. And over time, it may have spread into the common language used by ordinary people. As we know, many Norse loanwords don't pop up in the surviving documents until after the Norman Conquest, and that's what happened with this word as well. As I noted, it is first found in English documents in the 1200s. But interestingly, when it first appears, it appears in place names.

The first recorded use of the word *cunt* appears in a document from the year 1230 where its used as part of a street name in London. Believe it or not, the name of the street was 'Gropecuntlane' – literally 'grope cunt lane.' The street apparently had a lot of brothels, so that appears to be the origin of the name. During this period, the word as also used in medical textbooks to translate the Latin terms for female genitalia. So again, that implies that the word was considered to be the acceptable English term at the time.

It also appears in some surnames like Godewin Clawecuncte (1066) and John Fillecunt (1246), but in these cases, the word may have had a different meaning.

So as we put all this evidence together, we get conflicting signals. Some of the evidence suggests that this was a very naughty word, and other evidence indicates that it was quite acceptable. However, it is possible to reconcile this conflicting evidence. For example, it is possible that the Norse version of the word had filtered into the language, and had become somewhat acceptable during the early Middle English period, at least by the people on the streets, which is why it became part of a street name and certain surnames. But in some corners of society, especially among the upper classes, the word was still considered obscene. So that may explain why the nobles rejected the word *count* around the same time. If there was a social or class division at one time, it appears that the old taboo won out, and the word once again came to be viewed as vulgar and obscene. And that old street called 'Gropecuntlane' was later renamed as 'Magpie Lane.'

Now speaking of groping, I began this digression with the student Nicholas groping young Alison in the Miller's Tale. In the story, Alison initially rejects the advances and pulls away. She says that her husband is so jealous that he will kill her if he discovers that she is having an affair. Nicholas tells her not to worry. He can easily outsmart her husband and keep their affair a secret. He says, "A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, but if he koude a carpenter bigyle." In Modern English it reads, "A clerk has spent his time poorly if he can't fool a carpenter." The two young lovers then begin to kiss and make out.

A short time later, Alison goes to church where she meets a young parish clerk named Absolon. He is effeminate and proper. His hair and clothing are perfectly arranged. He loves to sing and dance, and play the gittern – which was a type of guitar. So he is lively and joyous, but there are some things that disgust him. The Miller says:

But, truth to tell, he was somewhat squeamish
Of farting and of dangerous speech.

But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel squaymous
Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous.

So prim and proper Absolon didn't like foul smells and vulgar language. Here the Miller uses the word *farting*, but was that considered a vulgar term at the time? Well, Chaucer uses it here without reservation, so it doesn't appear to be all that vulgar. You might also remember that I talked about that same word in the early English song 'Sumer is icumen in.' It has the line 'the buck verteth' which is generally interpreted as 'the buck farts.' The 'f' sound was often pronounced as a 'v' in the south of England and in the West Country. So if that was the intended meaning of the word in that song, it was one of the first recorded uses of the word *fart* in the English language.

That doesn't mean it was a brand new word in the language. There is at least one manuscript from the Old English period where the word is used to translate a Latin word for flatulence. So it appears to have been around during the Anglo-Saxon period. But again, it wasn't generally used in Old English, so it may have been considered a bit vulgar even back then.

By the way, the word has cognates in the other Germanic languages, so it appears to be a very old word – much older than the surviving documents tend to suggest. It may even go back to the original Indo-Europeans. Remember that the Indo-European 'p' sound became an 'f' sound in the Germanic languages, so if it came from an Indo-European root word, that ultimate root word would have begun with a 'p' sound. And many scholars think that there was such a root, and it gave us the word *partridge* for a type of bird, as in 'a partridge in a pear tree.' The word is apparently derived from an Indo-European root word for flatulence which passed into Greek with the same general meaning. The Greeks used that word for a specific type of bird which had fluttering wings and made a sound when it was flying around that resembled flatulence. The word ultimately passed through Latin and French and was borrowed into English in the early 1300s. So believe it or not, *fart* and *partridge* are apparently cognate, both being derived from the same Indo-European root word.

Whatever the age or history of the word, it was becoming more common in English documents by the late 1300s during the time of Chaucer. But it still represented something that many people found squeamish – including the prim and proper character of Absolon in the Miller's Tale. He is repulsed by flatulence and foul smells. But he is NOT repulsed by young Alison. When he meets Alison in Church, he is immediately attracted to her, and the Miller says that if she were a mouse and he a cat, he would have caught her straightaway.

That night, Absolon takes his gittern – or guitar – to the carpenter's house to serenade Alison. He strums his guitar and sings to her, but Alison has no interest in him. She is only interested in Nicholas. Absolon returns on many nights to sing beneath her window, but his singing only keeps Alison and her old husband awake at night, annoying both of them to no end.

Meanwhile, Nicholas devises a plan to spend an entire night with Alison by tricking her old husband. One day, Nicholas remains in his room all day, and the old carpenter starts to worry thinking that his young tenant might be dead. When he goes to check, Nicholas is just sitting there, staring up at the sky with his mouth open apparently in a trance. The old carpenter awakes him and asks what is wrong, and Nicholas tells the old man to grab a chair and sit down. He tells the old man that he must swear not to tell anyone, but based on his astrological calculations, a great deluge will begin the next Monday night, and it will consume everything just as Noah's flood did in the Bible. All human life will perish.

The old man begins to panic, but Nicholas explains that he has a plan. They can do what Noah did, and ride out the storm in boat. Since there isn't time to build an ark, he tells the old man to build three large tubs – one for the old man, one for his young wife, and one for Nicholas himself. The carpenter is to place the tubs in the rafters of the barn. On the next Monday night, when the rain is to begin, they are to all sleep in their respective tubs, and when the water rises, they will cut a hole in the roof and float away in the tubs and survive the flood.

The old carpenter thinks this is a great idea, and he spends the net few days building the tubs and hanging them in the rafters of the barn. That Monday evening, they all climb into their respective tubs and await the rain. But the old man grows tired and falls asleep. This is all according to Nicholas's plan. He and Alison climb down and head to Alison's bed to spend the night together. But who should show up at the window but prim and proper Absolon. Since no one has the seen the old carpenter for several days, Absolon assumes that he had gone away on another trip. So he sees an opportunity to once again show his affection for Alison. Finding himself outside of Alison's window, he tries to get her attention. The Miller says of Absolon:

And he coughed softly, in a quite tone:
"What do you, honeycomb, sweet Alison?
My fair bird, my cinnamon sweet,
Awake, my darling, and speak to me!

And softe he cougheth with a semy soun:
"What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!

Alison finally reaches her breaking point with Absolon as he is disturbing her on the only night she has to spend with Nicholas. She yells at him to go away. She says that she is in love with another man. She warns him, "Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston" – 'Go forth thy way, or I will cast a stone.' Abosolon begs Alison for a kiss before he goes. He says that he will leave once he has his kiss. So she goes to the window, and the drunken Miller recounted what happened next in the dark of the night. He says:

The window she undid, and did so in haste.
"Have done," said she, "come on, and do it fast,
Lest that our neighbors should look and spy."
This Absalom did wipe his mouth all dry;
Dark was the night as pitch, as dark as coal,
And at the window she put out her hole.
And Absalom, he felt no better nor worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse
Most savorously, before he was aware of this.
Aback he jumped, something was amiss,
For well he knew a woman has no beard;
He'd felt a thing all rough and long haired,
And said, "Oh my! alas! What did I do?"
"Teehee!" she laughed, and closed the window to.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

The wyndow she undoth, and that in haste.
"Have do," quod she, "com of, and speed the faste,
Lest that oure neighebores thee espie."
This Absolon gan wype his mouth ful drie.
Derk was the nyght as pich, or as a cole,
And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
Ful savorly, er he were war of this.
Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,
For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.
He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd,
And seyde, "Fy! allas! what have I do?"
"Tehee!" quod she, and clapte the wyndow to.

So Alison let Absolon have a kiss, but it wasn't the kind of kiss he expected. As the Miller put it, "he kiste hir naked ers" – 'he kissed her naked arse.' As I noted earlier, the word *arse* lost is 'r' in early American English. And *arse* became *ass* in much the same way that *curse* became *cuss*.

We sometimes refer to obscene or vulgar words as four-letter words. And technically speaking, *arse* is also a four-letter word. It has just lost a letter in American English. And to be fair, most Middle English versions of the Canterbury Tales spell it E-R-S, so it was sometimes a three-letter word back then as well.

Arse is another word that can be found in Old English, and in fact, it has Indo-European roots. And that's a good reminder that most of these risque words tend to be very old words, and tend to go back to Old English, and even to the older Proto-Germanic language. *Arse* is no exception. In fact, these types of words are also sometimes referred to as 'the Anglo-Saxon.' If you resort to 'the Anglo-Saxon,' you're using vulgarities. That also explains why these words tend to be short, simple words usually spelled with three or four letters because Old English words tend to be short and simple.

Also, I should note that the passage I just read concludes with Alison giggling and saying 'Tehee!' This is still a common way to express laughter in writing, and this passage is one of the earliest known uses of that expression in the English language.

So Alison laughs at Absolon, and Nicholas laughs at him too. Absolon is furious. He rubs his mouth with sand and straw and insists that he will get his revenge. He goes to a nearby blacksmith's shop and gets a red-hot poker. He then returns to the house and knocks on the window as before. This time, Alison suspects a thief, but Absolon identifies himself and says that has returned with ring given to him by his mother. He will give it to Alison for another kiss.

The passage continues with Absolon's request:

This will I give you for another kiss."
But Nicholas had risen for a piss,
And thought that he would carry on the joke
To have his arse kissed by this stupid bloke.
And so he opened window hastily,
And put out his arse, quietly,
Over the buttocks, his entire bum;
And then said this clerk, this Absalon,
"Speak, sweet bird, I know not where thou art."
Just then, this Nicholas let fly a fart
As loud as if it were the sound of thunder,
And nearly blinded Absalom down under;
But he was ready with his red hot iron
And on Nicholas's arse did he smite him.

This wol I yeve thee, if thou me kisse."
This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape;
He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.
And up the wyndowe dide he hastily,
And out his ers he putteth pryvely
Over the buttok, to the haunche-bon;
And therwith spak this clerk, this Absolon,
"Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art."
This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart,
As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,
That with the strook he was almoost yblent;
And he was redy with his iren hoot,
And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot.

So clever Nicholas got a red-hot poker on his bum. Now I should note that the Miller begins this passage by noting that Nicholas was out of bed because he has "risen for to pisse" – he 'had arisen to piss.' This is another four-letter word, but its not an Anglo-Saxon or Germanic word. It's actually a French loanword. So it's the first vulgarity we've encountered so far that was borrowed from French. I should note that this same word can also be found in many other modern Germanic languages, but they all apparently borrowed the word from French. It doesn't appear to be a native word. This is also another word related to a bodily function that became much more vulgar over time, perhaps because it became less common for people to do it in public. By the 1800s, it had become so vulgar, that people just reduced it to its first letter – '*p*.' It was similar to the way that we refer to the F word and the C word and S word today. And over time, 'p' came to be spelled P-E-E, and it still remains the more acceptable version of the word today.

Now in the story, Absolon has gotten his revenge by striking Nicholas on the butt with a hot poker. The Miller says that Nicholas began to scream and cry. He ran around yelling 'Water! Water!' The noise and commotion was so loud that it awakened Alison's old husband who was still asleep in his tub. Hearing the scream of 'Water! Water!,' the old man assumed that the deluge had begun and the flood was about to take him away. So he cut the ropes that were holding the tub in place. But with no water, the tub fell to the ground breaking the old man's arm. The neighbors came running to see what was happening. And when they arrived, they saw Nicholas and Alison laughing at the old carpenter. The old man told the crowd that he had hung from a tub in the roof of the barn because a flood was going to wipe everyone away. The Miller says that everyone laughed at the old man and though he had gone mad. Even Nicholas and Absolon laughed and made fun of him. The Miller concludes the tale with the following lines:

And every person laughed at all this strife.
Thus swived was this carpenter's wife,
For all his keeping of her and his jealousy;
And Absalom had kissed her nether eye;

And Nicholas had scalded his butt painfully.
This tale is done, and God save all the company!

And every wight gan laughen at this stryf.
Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al his kepyng and his jalousye;
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!

The most notable thing about this concluding passage is the statement "Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf" – 'Thus swived was the carpenter's wife.' Now we don't really use that old word *swive* anymore, but it is an old word for sexual intercourse. It basically meant 'screwed.' And in fact, the word *swive* was derived from an Old English word that meant to meant to revolve or turn or screw. So *swive* was basically the medieval equivalent of our modern word *screw* as a slang term for sex. And it was apparently a very vulgar term at the time. It wasn't the type of word that you would find in Knight's Tale or some other noble story. You would only find it in a 'churl's tale' like the Millers' Tale.

Now even though this old word *swive* has largely disappeared from the language, it does have some closely-related cognates that still survive. It's a Germanic word, and as I noted, the Old English root word meant to revolve or turn, but it also had a more general sense of a repeating motion. So it could refer to either a circular motion or a back-and-forth motion. And that probably explains how it came to be used a term for sex. That root word also gave us the word *swivel* which is based on the sense of something turning or revolving. It's also closely related to the words *swift* and *swoop* both meaning to move quickly. And it's probably related to the word *sweep*, perhaps via the Norse version of the word. *Sweep* has that sense of a back-and-forth motion. So *swive*, *swivel*, *swift*, *swoop* and *sweep* are all related.

Now I know what you're probably thinking. If *swive* was a vulgar term for sex in Middle English, and Chaucer used it here in the Miller's Tale, then what about the F-word? Did he also use the word *fuck*? Well, no. Chaucer never used that word. But apparently, he could have, because it was probably around during the late 1300s when he composed this tale.

This is another one of those words where we have very limited evidence before the 1500s, probably because the word was considered to be extremely vulgar and obscene during that period. Now I say 'probably' because, once again, we have some conflicting evidence in the historical record.

The traditional view is that the word *fuck* was first recorded in an English document around the year 1500 – so about a century after the current point in our overall story of English. And when it appeared, it was actually disguised through the use of a special code. The writer spelled the word by substituting each letter in the word with the following letter in the alphabet. So it was similar to the way Chaucer disguised the word *cunt* by employing the word *quaint*. In both cases, the context implies that the words were so vulgar at the time that a writer couldn't just use them

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openly. The words had to be disguised by either using a similar-sounding word or by spelling the word in an odd way.

This first recorded use of the word *fuck* is actually part of a poem that is composed in a complicated mixture of Latin and English. The word appears in the following passage, "Non sunt in celi/ quia fuccant uuiuys of heli." Again, that's a mixture of Latin and English, but if we translate it, we find that it's a passage condemning the local monks in the town of Ely near Cambridge. In Modern English, is reads, "They are not in heaven because they fuck the wives of Ely." The word is rendered as 'fuccant' – F-U-C-C-A-N-T – but as I noted, the scribe replaced each of those letters with the following or next highest letter in the alphabet. So in the document, it's actually spelled G-X-D-D-B-O-U. And if you try to decipher that on you own, it's pretty straight-forward, but you may wonder the U was replaced with an X and not a V or W. Well, remember that U, V and W were not yet distinct letters. They were all considered to be different ways of writing the letter U at the time. They became distinct after this particular manuscript was composed. So here, the scribe went directly from U to X.

By the way, there's another passage in this same manuscript that used the word *swive* which we saw earlier. That's the word that Chaucer used in the Miller's Tale. In Modern English, the line in the manuscript reads, "Brothers with knives go about an swive men's wives.' But again, the word *swive* is disguised in the same way by using the next highest letter in the alphabet. So that implies that both *swive* and *fuck* were too obscene to be used openly in this particular manuscript. [*SOURCE: Holy Shit, Melissa Mohr, p.153*]

Now I began that discussion by noting that that is the traditional view of the first recorded use of the word *fuck*. And that particular document with the disguised spelling is also the oldest citation for the word in the Oxford English Dictionary. But a few years ago, in the year 2015, a historian at Keele University in England named Paul Booth found three examples of the word being used in the early 1300s. The examples are found in legal documents from the years 1310 and 1311. And all three examples are actually references to man who had a very peculiar surname. His name was Roger Fuckebythenavel. On two occasions he was called to court to answer a criminal charge which isn't actually specified in the document. On the third occasion, the legal case was decided and Roger was outlawed and presumably never heard from again, which may be a good thing given than surname. The nature of that surname suggests that it was intended as a derogatory surname implying that Roger was too stupid to know how to have sex. But what's most important about this particular surname is that is seems to be a clear example of the word *fuck* being used in the early 1300s.

By the way, most modern scholars agree that the word *fuck* was around in the Middle English period, as well as the Old English period, even though it wasn't generally used in documents. And that's because the word appears to have cognates in several other Germanic languages including Middle Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish and German. The related words either have a similar sexual meaning or they mean 'to strike or thrust.' So that implies that this is yet another Germanic word, even though the lack of evidence in the written record makes it difficult to trace the history beyond the 1300s.

So we've seen how Chaucer incorporated a wide range of vulgarities into the Miller's Tale. And many of those words are still considered to be very offensive – perhaps even more offensive today than they were in the time of Chaucer.

Late in Chaucer's life, before he had a chance to compile a final version of the Canterbury Tales, he wrote a short passage which was intended to be the conclusion of the book. It is known today as the Retraction, and in it, Chaucer asks that the reader to forgive him for anything that the reader should find offensive in his works. Specifically, he begs forgiveness for his sins and his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees" – his 'translations and writings of worldly vanities.' He then includes a summary of all of the major works he composed during his lifetime which might contain offensive material. In each case, he simply included the name of the poem, but when he got to the Canterbury Tales, he described it as "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" – 'The tales of Canterbury, those that tend toward sin.'

In the years that followed Chaucer's death, the relatively small number of people who could afford to purchase a book clamored for a copy of the Canterbury Tales. As I noted in an earlier episode it was one of the first books published in England when William Caxton set up his printing press in the late 1400s. But by the 1600s, as people became more concerned about private parts, and bodily functions and sexual activities, the Canterbury Tales started to become too controversial for many readers. What had once been seen as risqué or slightly vulgar had become outright obscene over time. During that period, something obscene or disgusting came to be described as 'Chaucer's Jest.' And people started to refer to a bawdy or vulgar story as a 'Canterbury Tale.' [*SOURCE: Chaucer's Bawdy, Thomas W. Ross*]

The first dictionaries were also produced around that time, and at first, obscenities and vulgarities were included in those early dictionaries. But in the 1700s, those words started to be left out. They had become too obscene to even be listed as English words. Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary was considered to be the definitive word on English words at the time. Its impact still reverberates today. And Johnson also chose to omit those words. But a funny anecdote involving Samuel Johnson suggests that people weren't always as offended by those words as they claimed to be.

Supposedly, two ladies approached Johnson one day and thanked him profusely for not including those 'naughty words' in his dictionary. To which Johnson replied, "What! My dears! Then you have been looking for them?"

I'm going to conclude this episode on that note. Next time, we'll conclude our look at this very prolific period of English literature in the late 1300s. And we'll do so by shifting our attention to the north of England which will serve as a reminder that Chaucer's English was only one dialect of English at the time. We'll see how Chaucer dealt with those regional differences in the Reeve's Tale, and we'll also take a quick look at Sir Gawain and the Green Knight which was composed during this same time period in a northwestern dialect that was very different from Chaucer's London dialect.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.

EPISODE 130: DIALECT DIALOGUES

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 130: Dialect Dialogues. In this episode, we're going to look at the first dialect stories in English. Specifically, we'll explore the tale told by the Reeve in the Canterbury Tales. And we'll also examine a Middle English play from the north of England called the Second Shepherd's Play. These works represent some of the first attempts by English writers to feature characters who speak in regional dialects. In an era long before sound recordings, these dialogues provide a rare insight into the way people actually spoke in different parts of the England in the Middle Ages. So this time, we'll examine those dialect dialogues.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now last time, I mentioned that I was going to discuss Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in this episode, but due to time considerations, I've elected to save that poem for the next time. And that will actually be the last poem from this period in the late 1300s that we're going to explore in the podcast. From there, we'll move the story in the 1400s where we'll look at the impact of the printing press, the Great Vowel Shift, and lots of other fun stuff.

But this time, I want to focus on one last part of the Canterbury Tales. And it may be the most fascinating part for people who are interested in the development of the English language. That's because it represents one of the first attempts by an English writer to compose dialogue in a regional dialect. Of course, the writer was Geoffrey Chaucer, and the story was the tale told by the Reeve. The tale features two students from the north of England, and when Chaucer wrote their dialogue, he made sure that they used words that were unique to the north of England. He also used grammatical features that were associated with the north. And he spelled words to reflect the way they would have been pronounced in the north.

Modern writers do this type of thing all of the time, but it wasn't common before the time of Chaucer. And unlike later writers, he didn't treat that northern speech as inferior or vulgar. His northern characters are not country bumpkins or hillbillies. They're actually students at Cambridge. At they outsmart a miller who speaks in a traditional southern dialect.

Regional dialects have always existed in England, and scholars can trace some of those regional features back to the Anglo-Saxon period. They do that by examining the language of the surviving manuscripts. By looking at where those manuscripts were composed, they can discern certain regional features. Word choices and grammatical features sometimes varied by region. And spellings often varied from place to place, reflecting different pronunciations in those regions. By examining those documents and comparing the language in the them, scholars have identified several major dialects which we've examined in general terms in earlier episodes.

Though regional differences can be detected in those early manuscripts, the writers didn't tend to highlight those differences. They didn't present characters who spoke with specific regional accents or dialects. We might find a regional word or phrase in a character's dialogue, but that word choice typically reflects the speech of the writer who composed the story. But in the Canterbury Tales, we finally have a story with characters from a different part of the country who speak in their own unique regional dialect. We have dialogue that attempts to mimic that regional speech. And that gives us a great insight into the way people spoke in those regions, or at least the way Chaucer thought those people spoke. In a time long before tape recorders, we can actually get a sense of what these regional dialects sounded like.

As I noted, this particular story in the Canterbury Tales is the tale told by the Reeve. It follows the Miller's Tale which we looked at in the last episode, and it is actually told in direct response to the Miller's Tale. It features two students from the north of England who speak with a distinct northern dialect.

Before I take you through this tale and examine the way Chaucer handled that northern dialect, let me remind you of the some of the common features of that dialect. I outlined many of those features back in Episode 112, but since that was a while back, I thought it might be a good idea to give you a quick review.

First of all, the northern dialect of Middle English had a lot more Norse words than the southern dialect. As we know, the northern part of England had once been part of the Danelaw established by the Vikings, so it had more Scandinavian influence. And that specifically included the Norse pronouns *they*, *them* and *their*. In the south of England, people used the native Old English version of those pronouns, which were very similar, but they all began with an 'H' sound – *hi*, *hem* and *hire*. So the southern versions began with an 'H' sound, whereas the northern versions began with a 'TH' sound. Of course, those northern forms *they*, *them*, and *their* eventually replaced the southern forms. By the time of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer was already using the word *they* which was the form used as the subject of a sentence, but the other words *them* and *their* were still restricted to the north.

You might also remember that many northern words had a hard 'K' sound where the southern version has a softer 'CH' sound. The hard 'K' sound in the north was partly a feature of all of that Norse influence. Those Norse words tended to retain the original Germanic 'K' sound, but in Old English, that sound often shifted to a softer 'CH' sound. So in northern England, you might have attended a *kirk* which reflects that northern pronunciation with the hard 'K' sounds. But in the south of England, you would have gone to a *church* with the softer 'CH' sounds that had developed in Old English and were more common in the south.

Northerners also tended to use 'S' sounds as suffixes, whereas southerners often used other endings. That happened with both nouns and verbs. For example, northerners made nouns plural by adding an 'S' to the end which became standard over time, and of course, that's generally the ending we use today. So in the north, *book* became *books*, and *tree* became *trees*. But in the south, people used the 'EN' suffix for plural nouns which still survives in words like *children*, *oxen* and *brethren*. By the time of Chaucer, that northern 'S' ending had made its way down to

London, and Chaucer routinely used it, though the 'EN' suffix was also used in some words. Since that 'S' ending was associated with the north, Chaucer's northern characters always use it.

Northerners also gave their verbs an 'S' ending in third person singular. Of course, that's another northern feature that moved south and became standard over time. So that's why we say, "he has," "she moves," and "it seems." But during the time of Chaucer, people in the south tended to use the 'TH' ending which survived until the time of Shakespeare. So southerners would have said, "he hath," "she moveth," and "it seemeth." The northern 'S' ending didn't become common in the south until the 1500s, so Chaucer didn't tend to use it. He still used his native 'TH' verb ending. But again, his northern characters use the 'S' ending to reflect their northern speech pattern.

Another major difference between northern and southern English was the pronunciation of the long vowel sound represented by letter A. I discussed this distinction back in Episode 96. As you may recall, the letter A represented the /ah/ sound in Old English like in the words *what* and *father*. And it continued to represent that sound in the north of England during the Middle English period. So there was no change in the north. But in the south, the sound shifted to more of an 'aw' sound. So the sound was slightly raised in the throat region and the lips became rounded a bit. So in Middle English, the south had /aw/ where the north had /ah/, and both of these sounds changed further during the Great Vowel Shift which took place in the 1400s and 1500s. Thanks to those later changes, the sound was raised even further in the back of the mouth from /aw/ to /oh/ So the word *home* began as the Old English word *ham* (/hahm/) usually spelled H-A-M. But during the Middle English period, it became *hom* (/hawm/) usually spelled H-O-M to reflect the sound change. And of course, it eventually evolved into modern *home*. So again, /hahm/, /hawn/, /home/. That was the evolution in the south.

But in the north of England, that pronunciation was more conservative. It didn't change in the Middle English period. It remained /ah/, and it continued to be spelled with its traditional letter A. So there, a word like *home* would have continued to be *ham* – spelled H-A-M. If you lived during the time of Chaucer, this would have a been an obvious accent difference. To give you a modern example, if you can imagine someone today saying something like "I saw a flaw in the law," and then someone else saying "I sah a flah in the lah," that difference in pronunciation would have been similar to the difference that existed in the 1300s. And in Middle English, this difference was represented by spelling those words with an 'O' in the south and with an 'A' in the north. And again, Chaucer used this same spelling distinction when writing the dialogue of his northern characters.

There was also a regional difference in the way people pronounced certain short words like *so* and the number *two*. Rather than the modern vowel sounds, both of those words had a long 'A' sound in Old English, which remember was the /ah/ sound. And they also had a 'W' sound between the initial consonant and the vowel. So the word *so* was originally *swa*, and the number *two* was originally *twa*. Of course, the word for number *two* is still spelled with a 'W' to reflect that original pronunciation. In the south, the vowel sound changed as I noted earlier, and that 'W' sound in the middle disappeared. So those words changed quite a bit there. However, there was

no change in the north. So Chaucer's northern characters say things like *swa* for *so*, and *alswa* for *also*, and *twa* for *two*. They simply retained the Old English pronunciations.

Another major north-south difference was the first person pronoun '*I*.'   First of all, the pronunciation of the letter as /ai/ was a development that took place during the Great Vowel Shift a little later in our story. During these earlier periods of English, the pronunciation was different. The original sound of the letter I was /ee/. Think of Italian words for foods like *pizza*, *ravioli*, *spaghetti*, *linguini*. The letter I represents the /ee/ sound in those words. That's the traditional sound of the letter, and that was also the sound in Old and Middle English. But the first person pronoun was actually *ic* with a 'CH' sound at the end. In Old English, it was usually spelled I-C.

Now that pronunciation was retained in the south. But in the north of England, the word lost that 'CH' sound at the end and simply became /ee/ – spelled with just the letter I. That northern form *I* (/ee/) became standard throughout England over time, and the pronunciation shifted from /ee/ to /ai/ during the Great Vowel Shift. So our modern pronoun *I* is ultimately the northern form of the pronoun, but during the time of Chaucer, there was still a north-south divide. Northerners said /ee/ and southerners said /ich/, and the Reeve's Tale reflects that regional difference.

Another clear difference between southern and northern speech was the way people said "I am." The word *am* could be heard in both the north and the south, but southerners had a tendency to use the word *be* and northerners had a tendency to use the word *is*. So in the south, people would say "ich be" (or /ich bay/). In the north, people would say "I is." And those were considered to be strong markers of southern and northern speech, respectively.

Again, those were some of the most prominent features that distinguished southern English from northern English. We've explored most of those in earlier episodes, and they're also the ones used by Chaucer in the Reeve's Tale. So with that bit of background, let's turn to the Reeve's Tale and see how these features were depicted by Chaucer.

As I noted earlier, the Reeve's Tale immediately follows the Miller's Tale which we looked at in the last episode. The Miller's Tale concerned an old carpenter married to a young wife who was pursued by two potential lovers. The Miller portrayed the old carpenter as a gullible fool.

Now among the pilgrims who were listening to this story was the Reeve, and Chaucer told us in the General Prologue that the Reeve was a carpenter from Norfolk. We now find out why Chaucer included that earlier bit of detail. Since the Reeve was a carpenter by trade, he was angered by the Miller's depiction of a carpenter in his tale. Chaucer tells us that the Reeve was the only one who took offense at the Miller's story. Chaucer writes the following passage – first in Modern English:

Because he was skilled in the carpenter's craft.
A little ire or anger in his heart was left;
And he began to grouse and his blame was set alight.
"As I am," said he, "very well can I thee quiet."

Bycause he was of carpenteres craft,
A litel ire is in his herte ylaft;
He gan to grucche, and blamed it a lite.
"So the ik," quod he, "ful wel koude I thee quyte

So the Reeve is angry, and he says that he is going to **quyte** – or 'requite' – the story told by the Miller. Since he wants to get back at the Miller, he decides to tell a story about a miller. In this case, a crooked and dim-witted miller.

Now, one interesting note about that passage I just read to you. In the last line, the Reeve says, "So the ik" – literally 'So the I' – but it was a figure-of-speech that meant 'As I am.' So in that line of dialogue, the Reeve uses the word **ik** for **I**.

Now remember that the first person pronoun **I** took different forms in the north and south of England. Southerners said **ich** and northerners said **I** (/ee/). Well, in parts of eastern England, especially around Norfolk, people pronounced that word with a hard 'K' sound at the end. So they said /ik/ usually spelled I-K. And Chaucer has already told us that the Reeve was from Norfolk in the General Prologue. So here, the Reeve uses that pronoun form since he is from that area. And this is a small example of how Chaucer used local dialect forms in this story.

The Reeve then begins his tale which is set near Cambridge. And here, we see how the Reeve's Tale is told in direct response to the Miller's Tale. The Miller's Tale was set in Oxford where a crafty student outsmarted an old carpenter. Here, the Reeve' Tale is set outside of Cambridge, and as we'll see, it feature two students who outwit a crooked miller. So this is how the Reeve pays back the Miller for his story.

The Reeve begins his story by telling us that there was a mill in a town outside of Cambridge. The Miller who owned and operated the mill was named Simpkin. He was a bully and a brute who carried around knives. He intimidated people, and no one dared mess with him for fear of their lives. He had a wife who was proud and snooty. And together, they had two children – a 20-year old daughter and an infant son who was just 6 months old.

The Reeve tells us something else very important about the miller. He was a thief. He says:

A thief he was, it's true, of corn and meal,
And sly at that, his habit was to steal.

A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele,
And that a sly, and usaunt for to stele.

Now you might remember from an earlier episode that millers were commonly perceived to be thieves in the Middle Ages. So the Reeve's miller fits this stereotype. He always kept more than his fair share of the grain that was brought to him to be ground. And he often replaced part of the freshly ground flour with cheap bran.

One of the miller's regular customers was a college hall at the nearby university. The college manciple would bring the students' grain to the miller, and he would keep a close eye on the miller to try to prevent him from stealing anything. But on one occasion when the manciple was sick, someone else brought the grain and the miller stole much more than normal.

So the next time the college had a sack of grain, two of the students volunteered to take the sack to the miller so they could keep an eye on him. The students were named John and Alain. The Reeve says:

John was the one and Alain was the other;
In the same town were they born, a town called Strother,
Far in the north, I cannot tell you where.

John highte that oon, and Aleyn highte that oother;
Of o toun were they born, that highte Strother,
Fer in the north, I kan nat telle where.

So the Reeve informs us that the two students were from the far north. And he then tells us that they gathered their grain, mounted their horses, and headed to the mill. When they arrived, Alan greeted the Miller by saying "Hou fares thy faire doghter and thy wyf?" – 'How fares your fair daughter and your wife?' And right out of the gate, we can see that Alan speaks with a northern accent. He says 'How fares' with an 'S' rather than 'How fareth' with an 'eth' sound. Remember that the 'S' verb ending was originally a northern dialect feature.

The miller greets the two students and asks what they need. John replies and says, "by God, nede has na peer" – literally 'by God, need has no peer' – but it meant 'there is no other option.' They brought the grain because the manciple was sick and they were the only ones available to bring it. Again, John says that need "has na" peer. He uses the northern verb *has* rather than the southern *hath*. And he uses the northern word *na* spelled N-A rather than the southern form /naw/ – spelled N-O.

John then says "Hym boes serve hymself that has na swayn" – literally 'Him behooves serve himself that has no swain – or servant' – but to rephrase that a bit using modern syntax, it meant 'He who has no servant best serves himself – or 'he who has no servant must look after himself.' This passage requires a bit of translation in part because the word order is different from Modern English, but also because it uses a couple of Norse words that we don't really use today in standard English. And Chaucer used those Norse words because they were more common in the north of England where the students were from.

One of those words was the verb *boes* which meant 'behooves.' And the other Norse word was *swayn* which meant a servant.

So the two students have brought their grain to the miller, and they have told him that they had no other option but to do it themselves. They then explain that the manciple who usually brings the grain is very sick and unable to make the trip. John says:

Our manciple - I expect he'll soon be dead,
So aching are the teeth in his head -
And therefore I have come here with Alain
To grind our corn and carry it home again;

Oure manciple, I hope he wil be deed,
Swa werkes ay the wanges in his heed;
And forthy is I come, and eek Alayn,
To grynde oure corn and carie it ham agayn;

Again, we see several northern features here. John actually says of his manciple, "I hope he wil be deed" – literally 'I hope he will be dead.' But it didn't mean that he wanted the manciple to be dead. In the north of England, the word *hope* had a slightly different meaning than in the south. It meant that you expected or anticipated the event would occur. This meaning was derived from the Norse version of the word. So when John says "I hope he'll soon be dead,' that was just a northern way of saying 'I expect or anticipate that he'll soon be dead.'

The next line that I read was "Swa werkes ay the wanges in his heed" – literally 'So warks or aches the wangs or teeth in his head.' Again, *warks* and *wangs* were words that were common in the north. *Wark* is actually related to the verb *work* – but again, *wark* appears to be derived from the Norse version of the word. The English version *work* was focused on physical labor which was often hard, and grueling, and exhaustive. The Norse version *werk* was more focused on the physical pain associated with hard labor. So the Norse version acquired a sense of 'ache or pain.' And that's the version that John uses here when he speaks of the *werkes* or pains that the manciple was experiencing. And he says that the pains were in his *wangs* which meant teeth, but more specifically meant the molars. So maybe the manciple was suffering from an abscess in his teeth, which can certainly be debilitating.

John also said that they brought the corn to be ground, and that they intend to "carie it ham agayn" – 'carry it home again.' But here, the word *home* is spelled H-A-M. That reflects the northern pronunciation as /ham/. In the south, it would have been /hawm/ – spelled H-O-M.

Now the Miller takes the measure of the two young students. He assumes that they are naive, and that he can steal a large portion of their grain while they're not looking. So he asks the students what they intend to do while he's hard at work grinding the corn. But John isn't so naive. He replies that he and Alain will just hang out there around the hopper "and se howgates the corn gas in" – 'and see how the corn goes in.' Again, for the word *goes*, he said 'gas' with the northern vowel sound and the northern 'S' verb ending. So he says 'gas' whereas a southerner would have said 'gaweth.'

So John pretends to be interested in seeing the corn go into the hopper. He adds that he has never seen a hopper move 'til and fra' – or 'to and fro.' Again 'til and fra' is derived from Old Norse and was a common expression in the north.

Then the other student Alain speaks up and says if John is going to do '*swa*' – or do 'so' – then he (Alain) is going to go down to the trough and watch the meal come out after it is ground. Again, the students are pretending to be dumb and naive, as if they are trying to learn how the mill works. Alain says to his friend John, "I is as ille a millere as ar ye" – 'I am as bad a miller as are you.' Again, he says "I is" in the northern fashion, rather than 'ich am' or 'ich be' in the southern way. And he says that he is an "ille" miller using the Norse word *ille*, rather than the more common English word *bad*.

Now by this point, the miller knows exactly what's going on. He realizes that the students are keeping a close eye on him to make sure he doesn't take more than he is supposed to take. So the miller comes up with a plan of his own. He sneaks outside and unties the students' horse allowing the horse to run away. In recounting the story, the Reeve says:

He stripped off the bridle right at once,
When the horse was loose, be began to run,
Toward the fen, where wild mares ran,
And whined 'WeeHee!' through thick and through thin

He strepeth of the brydel right anon.
And whan the hors was laus, he gynneth gon
Toward the fen, ther wilde mares renne,
And forth with 'wehee,' thurgh thikke and thurgh thenne

Now in that last line, the Reeve says that the horse ran 'through thick and through thin.' This is actually the first recorded use of the phrase 'through thick and thin' in an English document, but here we see the original meaning behind the phrase. Today, if you do something 'through thick and thin,' it means that you do it persistently, regardless of the obstacles in front of you. Well, it appears that the phrase was actually derived from an earlier phrase which was 'through thicket and thin woods.' So if a horse ran 'through thicket and thin woods,' it meant that the horse ran through areas that were overgrown and dense, as well as areas that were more open and spacious. And here we see that phrase 'through thicket and thin woods' reduced to simply 'through thick and through thin.' And over time, it was shortened even further to just 'through thick and thin.' But again, this is the first known use of that phrase in an English manuscript.

So the Miller has untied the horse and let him run free, but he doesn't say anything to the students. Later, after all of the corn has been ground and placed in sacks, John goes to get his horse, but he realizes that it has run away. So he calls to Alain:

Our horse is lost! Alain, for God's bones
Get to your feet, come out, man, now, at once!

Oure hors is lorn, Alayn, for Goddes banes,
Step on thy feet! Com of man, al atanes!

Again in this passage, John speaks with the northern vowel sounds. And he says "banes" instead of 'bawnes' or 'bones.' And he says, "atanes" instead of 'at awnes' or 'at once.' John then says to Alan:

By God's heart, he shall not escape us both!
Why didn't you put the horse in the barn?

By Goddes herte, he sal nat scape us bathe!
Why ne had thow pit the capul in the lathe?

Now once again, in this passage, we see the northern pronunciation of **both** as 'bathe,' whereas a southerner would have probably said /bawth/. John also asks Alan why he didn't put "the capul in the lathe." **Capul** meant horse, and **lathe** meant barn. The origin of **capul** is unclear, but it was probably a French loanword derived from the Latin word **caballus** meaning horse. And **lathe** was another Norse loanword. He also used the word **sal** for 'shall.' Again, this was another northern feature. Very often, when a word began with a 'SH' sound, northerners would convert it into a simple 'S' sound. So a word like **shall** was often pronounced as /sal/ in the north, and that's the way the word is rendered here in John's northern speech.

There's also another interesting northern feature in those two lines. It's the part where John asks Alan why he didn't "**pit**" the horse in the barn. The word **put** is spelled P-I-T. Again, this spelling reflects the northern pronunciation. I discussed this feature back in Episode 113, but in case you don't remember that discussion, it had to do with a change in the sound represented by letter Y.

Now today, the letters I and Y generally represent the same vowel sounds, but in Old English they represented two distinct sounds. As I noted earlier, the letter 'I' represented the /ee/ sound. Remember those loanwords like **pizza** and **spaghetti** where 'I' represents that same vowel sound. Well in Middle English, the letter Y represented a similar, but slightly different sound. It was basically the /ee/ sound pronounced with rounded lips. So it was /ü./ This sound is still found in many languages in continental Europe, but it has largely disappeared from English. So originally, the difference between the letters I and Y was whether or not you rounded your lips when you pronounced that /ee/ vowel sound. The lips were rounded for Y, but not for I.

Well, in the early Middle English period – in the northern and eastern parts of England – people stopped rounding their lips for the Y sound. And when they did that, the sounds represented by the letters I and Y became identical. They were both pronounced as /ee/. And because they were the same sound, it became common for scribes to use the letters I and Y interchangeably in those regions. And over time, that pronunciation spread to the south and the west as well. And that's why the two letters are still somewhat interchangeable in Modern English.

Well, at the time Chaucer composed the Reeve's Tale, this was still a feature of the north and east. And the word **put** was an Old English word that had originally been spelled P-Y-T and had been pronounced with that rounded /ü/ sound. But since that roundness had disappeared in the north and east, the word was spelled with an 'I' to indicate that the northern pronunciation was /peet/. Our modern pronunciation of the word as /put/, and the spelling P-U-T, reflects the

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southern and western development of the word where the roundness in the vowel was retained, and it evolved into a 'U' sound which is also rounded. But in the Reeve's Tale, the word **put** was spelled P-I-T to reflect the northern pronunciation. By the way, we have a similar situation in Modern English. Think about the word **busy** – B-U-S-Y. It is spelled in the southern manner with a 'U,' but it's pronounced in the northern manner with an 'I' sound – /bizzy/. And that happened as these dialects blended together in places like London. Sometimes, the spelling was taken from one dialect and the pronunciation from another. So that's why John asks Alan why he didn't 'pit' the horse in the barn, instead of 'put' the horse in the barn – or the 'capul in the lathe.'

With the horse on the loose, John and Alain chase after it, leaving their ground corn behind unguarded. The miller's plan has worked, and he proceeds to steal a half a bushel of their flour. The two young students finally catch the horse, but by this point, it is already nightfall. And they realize that they've been had by the Miller. They're both embarrassed that they've let the Miller get the better of them. John says, "Now are we dryve til hethyng and til scorn" – 'Now are we driven to contempt and scorn.' Here, John uses the Norse word **hethyng** to meant contempt or mockery. Again, we see the Norse influence in his speech.

So the two young students retrieve the horse and return to the mill, but it is too late in the day for them to return home, so they ask the miller if he has somewhere for them to spend the night. The miller doesn't have a separate room for the boys, but he offers to let them spend the night with him and his family. They can all share the common room. The students gladly accept the offer. As John says in the original Middle English:

I have herd seyd, 'Man sal taa of twa thynges
Slyk as he fyndes, or taa slyk as he brynges.'

Now here's a literal translation of this passage:

I have heard said, 'Man shall take of two things
Such as he finds, or take such as he brings'

This is a proverb which basically means, 'Of two things, a person should take either what he finds or what he brings.' In this case, the students have no other option, so that take what they find, even if that means sharing a room with the crooked miller and his family.

Now that proverb I just read is a little tricky to translate, and in fact, in the 1960s, New York University professor Vincent F. Hopper prepared a translation of the Reeve's Tale. It was part of a larger translation of the Canterbury Tales. And in his translation, he included a footnote to the passage I just read. In fact, it's the only footnote he included in his translation of the Reeve's Tale. He wrote, "There is no sensible way of translating the several passages where the students speak in their northern dialect."

Now that may have been a little harsh, but the meaning of some of these passages can be difficult to decipher. And that passage I just read is full of northernisms. John says that "Man sal taa of twa thynges" – 'Man shall take of two things.' As I noted earlier, *sal* was the northern form of *shall*, and *twa* was the northern form of *two*. Also, the line uses the word *taa* as a shortened form of *take* which also happens to be a Norse word.

The second line was "Slyk as he fyndes, or taa slyk as he brynges" – literally 'Such as he finds, or take such as he brings.' The line uses *slyk* for *such* because *slyk* was the Norse version of the word *such*. And *fyndes* is the word *finds*, and *brynges* is the word *brings*. And note that both of those verbs end in an 'S' in the northern manner – *fyndes* and *brynges*. The southern form would have ended in 'TH' – *fyndeth* and *bryngeth*. So again, this passage reflects the fact that the students come from the north.

One other quick note about these sleeping arrangements. It harkens back to the last episode where I talked about the gradual shift from communal living to private living over the course of the Middle Ages. Here we see a typical living arrangement with the miller, his wife, their daughter, their infant son, and the two northern students all sharing the same room. That was not at all unusual for the Middle Ages.

So having secured lodging in the miller's home for the night, the two students, the miller and his wife all stay awake and drink and talk. By the time they lie down to sleep, the Miller is drunk, and his wife is tipsy too. Here's the passage:

To bed he went, and with him went his wife.
Like a jaybird, she was jolly and light,
So was her jolly whistle wet,
The cradle at her bed's feet was set.

To bedde he goth, and with hym goth his wyf.
As any jay she light was and jolyf,
So was hir joly whistle wel ywet.
The cradel at hir beddes feet is set.

So the miller and his wife go to bed and place the infant's cradle at the foot of the bed. The most interesting thing about this passage is the part where it says of the miller's wife that her "whistle wel ywet" – that her 'whistle was well wet.' This is an early rendering of the phrase 'wet your whistle' to mean 'have a drink.' And it's the first known use of that phrase in the English language.

So everyone has turned in for the night. The miller and his wife are in their bed with their infant son beside them in his cradle. And the millers' daughter is in her bed. And the two northern students are in their bed trying to fall asleep. But they can't because the miller is so drunk that he's out cold and snoring loudly. And his wife soon joins him, snoring almost as loudly as her husband.

Eventually, Alan pokes John and says "Herdestow evere slyk a sang er now?" – 'Have you ever heard such a song before now?' Here he refers to the snoring as a song. And notice that he asks John if he had ever heard "slyk a sang" – 'such a song.' Again, he uses the Norse word *slyk* for *such*, and he uses the northern pronunciation *sang* instead of southern *song*.

He then curses the couple, saying "A wilde fyr upon thair bodyes falle!" – 'May a wild fire upon their bodies fall!' Now this line is interesting because Alan wishes for a wild fire upon 'their' bodies. He uses the Norse pronoun *their* which is one of our standard pronouns today. But remember that it was restricted to the north of England during the time of Chaucer. In the south, people still used the traditional third person pronoun *hire*. So the use of the pronoun *their* was a very strong marker of northern speech. And in fact, that line I just read is actually the only time Chaucer ever used the pronoun *their* in all of his writings. For him, it was strictly a northern dialect word.

Now, at this point with the two students being kept awake by the snoring, Alan decides to take revenge on the miller. He turns to John and says that he is going to go to the daughter's bed. He says that the miller has stolen their corn, and now he's going to pay the miller back by sleeping with his daughter. John warns him to be careful because the miller is a dangerous man, and he will attack them both if he discovers what's going on. Alan leaves, and makes his way to the daughter's bed.

After a few minutes, John gets restless and decides that it isn't fair that Alan is having all the fun. So he crawls out of bed and finds the baby's cradle in the dark, and he slowly moves it from the foot of the miller's bed to the foot of his own bed. A short time later, the miller's wife gets out of bed to pee, and when she returns, it is too dark in the room to see. So she feels around for the cradle, and when she finds it, she crawls back into the bed – only it's not her bed. Because John had moved the cradle to the foot of his own bed, she now crawls into bed with him. And she assumes that John is her husband the miller. A few minutes later, John starts making out with the wife. The Reeve tells us, "So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore" – 'She had not had such a merry time for years.'

The late night soon turns to early morning shortly before sunrise. Alain is still in bed with the miller's daughter. He tells her goodbye and says to her, "I is thyn awen clerk, swa have I sel!" – 'I am thine own clerk, so have I happiness.' Here he says "I is" in the northern manner. And he says "*awen*" for *own*. And he says *swa* for *so*. Again, these are all northern features.

In response, the daughter confesses to Alain that she and her father had stolen part of the boys' grain, and she had used it to bake a large loaf of bread. She tells him that the loaf was hidden behind the door of the mill, and he should be sure to grab it on his way back home.

Alain gets out of bed and tries to find John and wake him, but it is still pitch dark in the room. He arrives at John's bed, but he discovers the cradle in front of it. He is confused, and he assumes that he has made a mistake and found the miller's bed by mistake. Of course, he doesn't realize that John had moved the cradle from the miller's bed to his own bed. So Alain continues to feel

around and finally locates the bed without the cradle. He assumes that he has found John's bed, and he crawls in. Of course, he doesn't realize that he has actually crawled in bed with the miller.

Assuming that the miller is John, Alan whispers to him to wake up. He then says:

I have three times in this short night,
Swived the miller's daughter on her back.

As I have thries in this shorte nyght
Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright,

Now as we saw in the last episode, *swived* was a vulgar term for sex. So John accidentally confesses to the miller that he has had sex with the daughter. The miller immediately reaches out and grabs John by the neck and begins to curse at him. He says:

"Ah, false traitor! Lying clerk!" said he,
"You shall be killed, by God's own dignity!"

"A, false traitor! false clerk!" quod he,
"Tow shalt be deed, by Goddes dignitee!"

The two men begin to wrestle and fight, and Alain punches the miller in the nose – leaving him bloodied. The miller then chases Alain, but the miller stubs his toe, and falls into the other bed occupied by his wife – and John. The wife is startled and wakes up. At first, she thinks that she has been attacked by an incubus – an evil spirit that seduces women in their sleep. Then she remembers the two students and assumes that they are fighting with each other. She crawls out of bed and finds a stick. She intends to smack them with the stick, but all she can see is shadowy figures fighting with each other. The Reeve says:

And by that light, she saw them both two,
But certainly, she could not tell who was who.

And by that light she saugh hem bothe two,
But sikerly she nyste who was who.

She finally hits one of them in the head with the stick, assuming that it is one of the students, but it's actually her husband.   The Reeve says:

And down he went and cried, 'Help me! I'm dying!"
These two clerks beat him well and left him there lying.

That doun he gooth, and cride, "Harrow! I dye!"
Thise clerkes beete hym weel and lete hym lye.

The two students then grab their clothes and their horse and ride away being sure to take their grain and the hidden loaf that had been baked with their stolen flour. The Reeve then concludes his story with a final refrain which harkens back to the final passage of the preceding tale – the Miller's Tale. In the preceding Miller's Tale, an old carpenter was the butt of the joke. Now, the Reeve, who was a carpenter by trade, has made a miller the butt of his joke. The Reeve says:

Thus is the proud miller soundly beat,
And has lost all of the ground wheat,
And paid for the suppers that were eaten,
By Alain and John who delivered the beating.
His wife is screwed, also his daughter took;
Thus befitting a miller who's also a crook.
And therefore this proverb is said with truth,
"Do evil to others and evil is done to you."
The cheater shall himself be the one cheated.
And God, who sits on high in majesty,
Save all this company, both strong and frail!
Thus have I repaid this miller with my own tale.

Thus is the proude millere wel ybete,
And hath ylost the gryndynge of the whete,
And payed for the soper everideel
Of Aleyn and of John, that bette hym weel.
His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als.
Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals!
And therfore this proverbe is seyd ful sooth,
'Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth';
A gylour shal hymself bigyled be.
And God, that sitteth heighte in magestee,
Save al this compaignye, grete and smale!
Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale.

So that concludes the Reeve's Tale – one of the earliest examples of an extended dialogue composed in a regional English dialect.

Now despite this innovation, some people apparently didn't 'get it.' There are over 80 surviving manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales from the Middle English period, and the actual text of the students' dialogue varies a bit from one manuscript to the next. It appears that some scribes who copied the text couldn't figure out why the students's dialogue was so unusual – why it used strange words, and spellings and grammar. So they attempted to fix or correct the text. They changed the dialogue so that the northern students spoke standard southern English. In other cases, it appears that the scribes did the opposite. They understood what Chaucer was doing, and they actually tried to give him some help. They enhanced the students' northern dialect by adding some additional northernisms that weren't included in the earliest copies.

Again, some of that confusion may have been because this was such a new approach to composing dialogue. But within another generation or so, it started to become much more common. And in fact, by the mid-1400s, we have another example of a writer trying to mimic the speech of another region, only in this case, the regions were reversed. Chaucer was a southern writer who wrote northern dialogue. But in this next example, we have a northern writer who composed passages in a southern dialect.

This example actually comes from a play composed in the north of England in the early to mid 1400s – so just a few years after Chaucer died. It was a mystery play which was a type of play that was based on stories from the Bible or the lives of Saints. Most people in this period didn't have access to a Bible, and most Bibles were written in Latin, so these types of plays were a common way to present Biblical stories to the masses. And one of the most well known mystery plays of the Middle Ages is known as the Second Shepherd's Play. It was composed near Yorkshire in the north of England, and the dialogue is composed in a northern dialect.

The play begins with three shepherds in the English countryside, again all of whom speak with distinctly northern accents. They are soon joined by a man named Mak who is a local thief well-known for stealing sheep. Mak knows that the shepherds will recognize him, so he tries to disguise himself. As he approaches them, he pulls a cloak over his head and pretends that he is a yeoman from the south of England who has been sent there on a royal mission. Of course, the royal court was also located in the south, so Mak tries to affect a southern accent to fool the shepherds. But the shepherds know exactly who he is.

One of the shepherd's says, "Mak, where has thou gon? Tell us tythyng." – 'Mak, where have you been. Tell us some tidings or news." To which Mak responds:

What! I am a yeoman, I tell you, of the king;
The self and the same, sent from a great lord,
And such.
A curse on you! Go hence
Out of my presence;
Why who be I?

What! Ich be a yoman, I tell you, of the king;
The self and the same, sond from a great lordyng,
And sich.
Fy on you! Goyth hence
Out of my presence;
Why who be ich?

So here, Mak says "Ich be a yoman" – 'I am a yeoman.' So he uses the distinctly southern "ich be" – meaning 'I am.' And he says that he has been "**sond**" from a great lord. It meant 'sent' from a great lord, but in the north, people said 'sand' instead of 'sent.' So instead of using the proper southern form of the verb, Mak simply attempts to southernize the vowel in the northern word. He says "**sond**" instead of northern 'sand.' He also uses the southern word **sich** – or **such**

– rather than the northern form *slyk* which we saw earlier in the Reeve's Tale. And he orders the shepherds to "goyth hence" using the southern 'th' verb ending.

Again, the shepherds are not fooled by any of this. One of them says, "Why make ye it so qwaynt" Mak, ye do wrang." – 'Why are you behaving so strangely? Mak, you're doing wrong.'

After another exchange between Mak and the shepherds, one of the shepherds says,

Bot, Mak, is that sothe?
Now take outt that southren tothe
And sett in a torde!

But, Mak, is that so?
Now take out that southern tooth
And set it in a turd!

So in other words, 'Stop talking with that southern accent. We know exactly who you are.'

Now what's so interesting about these early portrayals of regional accents is that they seem somewhat neutral in their approach. The dialects aren't really stigmatized. Chaucer's students speak with northern accents, but they are not depicted as stupid or naive. And Mak the sheep-stealer tries to mimic a southern accent, but he is only ridiculed because he is lying and pretending to be someone he's not. The accent itself isn't mocked or ridiculed.

But all of that would change over the next few centuries. Johannes Gutenberg was introducing his printing press to Germany at almost the exact same time that this northern mystery play was composed in England. Within a few years, William Caxton would bring that printing press to England. And he chose to print his documents in a Midlands dialect – especially the dialect spoken around London – in part because it combined northern and southern features and was therefore better understood throughout the country. Some of those northern features like the plural 'S' and use of the pronoun *they* were already used in London during the time of Chaucer. By the time Caxton's printing press was in operation there a century later, many other northern features had spread to London – like the 'S' verb ending, and the northern pronoun 'I'.

Caxton's printing press helped to make that printed dialect the standard dialect of English. And inevitably, it meant that the other dialects became non-standard, and they therefore became stigmatized. So as we move into the Modern English period, we find more and more works of literature that feature characters who speak with a regional dialect. But in many of those cases, the dialect is used to imply something negative about the character. Non-standard or stigmatized dialects were often used to imply that the character was stupid or naive or corrupt. But again, that appears to be a later development that really came about after a standard form of English had emerged.

In these earliest examples from the late 1300s and early 1400s, we find that the dialects are used in a much more descriptive way. They're not used to mock or ridicule. They're merely used to represent the way people actually spoke. And for that reason, they are a fascinating resource for modern scholars who try to piece together the evolution of English in the Middle Ages.

Next time, we'll turn our attention to another major of work of literature from this period. In fact, it may be the second most well-known piece of Middle English literature outside of the Canterbury Tales. It's the Arthurian poem known as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. And it provides us with another glimpse of the English language as it was spoken outside of London. The Gawain poem was composed in a northwest Midlands dialect that was very different from Chaucer's dialect. So it'll be a good opportunity to see how different Modern English might have been if Caxton had established his printing press in another part of England.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.