THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 106:
AN ILLUMINATING DEVELOPMENT

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 106: An Illuminating Development. In this episode, we're going to look at a brand new industry that was popping up around Western Europe in the early 1200s – the bookmaking industry and the book trade. For the first time, books were starting to be mass produced. And most of those books will filled with much more than words on a page – they were also filled with color. Most books produced during this period were literally works of art. The pages were adorned with pictures and decorations known as illuminations. So the production of a Medieval book required much more than a scribe and pen. It required a team of trained artisans who worked together to assemble these literary works. And for the first time, most of this work was being done by craftsmen in private workshops, not by monks in a church or monastery. So this time, we'll explore the birth of bookstores and the book trade, and we'll also look at how color influenced that industry and influenced the English language.

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 at Patreon.com/historyofenglish. And as always, you can reach me by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com,

Now over the past few episodes, I've discussed the importance of an early 13th century text called the Ancrene Wisse. And I've pointed out a few of the many loanwords that were recorded for the first time in that document. I also noted a few episodes back, that the Ancrene Wisse was the name give to the document in one of the early versions of the manuscript. But several different versions of the document have survived the centuries. Four surviving versions of the manuscript were all produced between the years 1200 and 1250. And there are several more copies from the following century and a half. And there are also fragments of other copies. And the text was translated into Latin and French as well. And multiple copies of those translations also survive.

This points to how popular the text was at the time. But it also points to something else. It shows that certain manuscripts were being mass produced during this period. A few episodes back, I talked about the manuscript composed by Walter of Bibbesworth which was designed to help English children learn how to speak French. And again, I noted that the text was apparently very popular because multiple versions of the book have survived the centuries. So you can notice a trend developing here.

When we looked at Old English documents, we were lucky to have a single surviving copy to examine. But now, in the early Middle English period, we start to get multiple copies of the same text.

This development came about for two complementary reasons – supply and demand. By the early 1200s, Western Europe had a new class of literate consumers who coveted books and other reading materials. This included students at the new universities, as well as lesser nobles, educated bureaucrats, tradesmen, and a small but growing literate class in towns and cities. So

books were no longer the exclusive domain of the churches, and monasteries, and kings and barons. There were lots of other people who wanted their own books.

In order to satisfy that demand, a new industry started to appear. Scribes started to go out on their own and open shops and sell their services to the general public. And they were joined by artists, and parchment makers, and dye makers, and book binders. They all started to get in on the action. And soon there was a steady supply of books to satisfy that demand. So this time, I want to explore how that new book trade developed, and I want to examine how it influenced the English language.

Our story really beings with those universities that I talked about back in Episode 95. As students poured into new university towns like Paris and Oxford, they needed access to the texts that were being taught in those schools. And you might remember from that earlier episode that one of the factors contributing to the rise of universities was the discovery of all of those ancient Greek manuscripts that had been preserved by scholars in the Arab world. Those old documents had been translated from Greek into Arabic, and now they were being translated into Latin. These works introduced Greek philosophy and the Greek knowledge of the world – especially the works of Aristotle. And it also introduced mathematical innovations from the Muslim world, like Arabic numerals, the number zero, and the algebra of al-Khwarizmi. These new works were added to the traditional corpus of theological and religious texts.

Prior to this point, it was possible for a church or monastery or wealthy baron to collect a copy of just about every important manuscript known in Western Europe. But now, that was becoming almost impossible with all of the new manuscripts that were coming on the scene. And even if there was a place where all of the manuscripts could be kept, it wasn't in those burgeoning universities because those universities didn't have libraries yet.

The various teachers or masters had their own books that they used in their lectures, but the students had to obtain their own copies – from somewhere else. So there was a heavy demand for books in those university towns, but there was a limited supply. And as often happens in that situation, a new industry was born. The same universities that generated that demand for books also supplied part of the solution. They were producing graduates who could read and write and who were looking for work. So these two factors reinforced each other. As more students arrived there was a need for books. And as more students graduated, there were more and more scribes who could provide those books. It also meant there were more literate graduates who wanted their own books. So education led to literacy, which led to the demand for books, which led to a brand new industry. And education was really the fuel that powered this new industry.

One of the first places where craftsmen took advantage of this new demand for books was in Paris – next to the very large and important university there. Shops started to pop up where scribes and artists offered to produce books on demand. Sometimes they actually sold completed manuscripts, but in most cases, they only had a sample copy which showed the quality of the work that was produced by the shop. A student or noble or other customer could examine the samples and order a book. They could specify exactly how they wanted the book to be made - how it would be formatted, how it would be decorated or illuminated, and how it was to be

bound. Once the terms were agreed upon and a deadline was set, the bookmaker would go to work and produce the book.

Now, it was not cheap to commission a book to be made. Again, these were works of art, and they required many hours or careful and diligent work to complete. So unless the student came from a wealthy or noble family, he or she wasn't usually able to afford one of these custom-made books. But there was another option.

Most booksellers had copies of the textbooks used by the masters at the local university. The asters usually approved the copies used in the those bookstores. And for a fee, the book seller would let students borrow one section or chapter at a time so they could copy it for themselves. This proved to be a lucrative business model since the students did all of the work, and the bookseller only had to lease his sample or exemplar.

So the early Paris book trade was tied to the university, and the university tried to exercise as much control as possible over that trade. It wanted to prevent students from being over-charged and exploited. Remember that this was the whole idea behind the university. Initially, a university was just the collection of students – basically a student union which sought to protect the interests of the students from exploitation. So this was part of the reason why that university or student union existed in the first place. Paris booksellers were licensed by swearing an oath to the university that they would act in good faith and not exploit the students who needed books. And in return, the university recognized the role of the book sellers and approved the samples that the booksellers provided to students.

But remember that these early universities didn't have formal libraries yet. So book collections were held in private – by churches or monasteries or private collectors. You couldn't just go to a local library and check out a book and return it when you were finished reading it. If you wanted a book to read, you either had to borrow one from a friend or purchase one for yourself. And as I noted earlier, there were more and more educated people who wanted books. So these booksellers soon found lots of other customers knocking on their door.

And these customers weren't just interested in the theological texts taught in church schools, or the technical books used in universities. They also wanted storybooks and histories, especially the romance literature that was all the rage in Western Europe. Those were stories about knights and chivalry and King Arthur and Charlemagne.

They also wanted more practical books like cookbooks with recipes, and medical books that explained how to treat illnesses, and language books that would help their learn to speak Latin or French or another language. They wanted bestiaries with pictures and descriptions of exotic animals that supposedly existed in other parts of the world. So the demand for books kept those early booksellers busy, and it led to the rapid growth of the industry from the mid-1100s throughout the 1200s.

According to tax records from this period, there were at least 58 booksellers identified by name in Paris in the 1200s. And there may have been more than that who were not listed by name. Bookmakers and sellers soon opened shops in Italy and England – again initially near universities. By the current point in our story in the mid 1200s, books were being produced by professional bookmakers at Oxford, soon followed by similar shops in Salisbury, York and Westminster. According to the English tax records from the mid-1200s, Oxford had 23 professional scribes who copied the books, and 18 illuminators who prepared the illustrations for the books, and 12 bookbinders who actually took the individual pages and bound them together into a proper book. In fact, the word ***bookbinder*** is a native English term combining the Old English words ***book*** and ***bind***. And it appears for the first time in an English tax roll from the year 1251 where an individual is identified as "Walteri le Bokbyndere" – 'Walter the Bookbinder."

Most important of all, the Oxford tax records list nine ***stationers***, which was the term coined for a bookseller. It was a word adapted from Latin and French, and it referred to the fact that booksellers had shops that were stationary – in fixed locations – usually near universities. So they were distinguished from other merchants and traders who tended to roam about looking for customers. Now today, we don't usually refer to a bookseller as a ***stationer***, but we do sometimes buy ***stationery*** in a bookstore or office supply store. The word ***stationery*** – as in paper and envelopes – was coined in the 1700s, and it literally meant the materials sold by a ***stationer***. So the noun ***stationary*** (meaning something that you write on) is related to the adjective ***stationary*** (meaning a fixed location). And the connection has to do with the fact that the first booksellers were called ***stationers*** because they had shops at fixed locations in town.

By the mid-1200s, most books were being made by professional bookmakers – not monks working in churches and monasteries. In fact, by the end of the century, some monasteries were outsourcing some of their work to private scribes and illuminators.

So the Church's monopoly over education had given way to universities. And the Church's near monopoly over manuscript production had given way to professional bookmakers. That allowed secular literature to become more common. All of this would have long-term consequences for the culture of Western Europe – as the scope of the Church's influence started to decline.

This development also had linguistic consequences. As long as the Church produced manuscripts, they were almost always produced in the language of the Church which was Latin. But when professional bookmakers took over, that changed. They produced books according to the demands of their customers, so they were much more willing to produce books in the local vernacular. And that helps to explain why books started to be composed in English again in the 1200s.

As long as the Church dominated the production of manuscripts, the work was mostly done by monks, so there was no need for a trade guild for scribes and artists. But as the book industry developed, professional scribes and illustrators started to form guilds, which was common at the time.

In that earlier episode about universities, I noted that the universities were very much a product of the guild system that existed in Medieval Europe where an apprentice studied and trained to become a master – which is why a university graduate can still obtain a 'master's' degree to this day. Well, the guilds formed for the book craftsmen worked the same way.

For example, scribes were more than writers or copiers. They were also calligraphers who had to know how to work with different fonts and characters to satisfy the demands of customers. An aspiring calligrapher had to serve as an apprentice for at least seven years. The final year was devoted to the production of a ideal sample or piece or work by which the apprentice could be judged to be a master in his own right. If the sample piece was deemed to be worthy by the guild, the apprentice was allowed to join the guild as a professional scribe and was permitted to open his own shop. So if the sample piece of work was good enough, the scribe became a master, and that's why that sample piece of work became known as a ***masterpiece***. Today, it refers to a work of perfection, but originally it referred to the best work of an apprentice.

Of course, the scribe was just one of the persons involved in the production of a book. Parchmenters were required to produce the parchment used in the books. Bookbinders were required to sew the pages together and provide a beautiful cover. As I noted, books of this period were usually illuminated with fancy pictures and decorations. So artists were required to illuminate the book.

I should note that book production was not the exclusive domain of men. Women were also actively involved. In fact, there are quite a few mentions of husband and wife pairs – usually with the husband acting as scribe and the wife responsible for the artwork. This often became family business with sons and daughters also involved in the production of books. The children often inherited the business from their parents.

I've noted that these Medieval bookmakers made books based on the specifications of their customers. But some books were in such high demand that the bookmakers just mass produced them because they knew there was always an audience for them. One of those books was the Bible – specifically the portable, handheld Bible. This type of Bible was really innovated during this period, and it has remained pretty much unchanged for the last 800 years.

Up until this point, Bibles tended to be large, heavy manuscripts that were very difficult to pick up and move. But I noted a few episodes back that friars made their first appearance in England in the early 1200s. And friars traveled from town to town, preaching to the people wherever they could gather an audience. So they needed a portable Bible – ideally one that could fit in the palm of their hand. Merchants and pilgrims also wanted portable Bibles. So the professional bookmakers came up with a solution.

They used really thin pieces of parchment rather than the thicker cuts used for traditional manuscripts. Rather than using covers made of wood and wrapped in leather, they simply used leather without the wood. They also reduced the size of the font and made very small illustrations. In fact, the bookmakers were always looking for ways to squeeze more words on a

page since vellum was expensive. One way to do that was to change the font in a way to make the letters narrower. The traditional letters used by scribes were known as Carolingian letters. They were fat and round. Now, with the mass production of books, that font was changed to make the letters slimmer and narrower. This was the advent of what became known as Gothic letters. We can still see some of this in modern writing. Think about the letter O. Sometimes it appears as a perfect circle. That was closer to the traditional Carolingian style. But sometimes, it appears more vertical and oval-shaped like it has been pushed together on both sides. Well, that's more like the Gothic style that emerged during this period. And that change was made in order to squeeze more letters – and thus more words – onto a page. When compared to the older Carolingian letters, the new Gothic letters allows scribes to place three times as many letters on a single page of parchment. That reduced the cost of the book since it meant that less parchment was required. It also allowed bookmakers to produce smaller Bibles.

Bookmakers were also adapting other innovations that I have alluded to in prior episodes, and these innovations were also applied to those new portable Bibles. Do you remember the name 'Stephen Langton?' He was the man named as the Archbishop of Canterbury over the objection of King John, and that led to a prolonged conflict between John and the Pope. Well, you might remember that I mentioned one other interesting fact about Langton in that earlier episode. Before becoming Archbishop, we was the man credited with dividing the books of the Bible into the chapters that are used today. Prior to that, the various passages of the Bible were separated by blank lines. But Langton divided them into numbered chapters. That innovation was applied to the new Bibles that were mass produced during this period, and it remains the standard way of subdividing the Bible to this day.

And remember when I talked about glossaries, I also talked about the development of alphabetical order? Well, that was another innovation adopted and expanded by these bookmakers. An alphabetical index of Hebrew names and a separate table of contents were often included in these new Bibles. Other innovations of this period included running titles across the top of the pages and colored paragraph marks. All of these developments were designed to make it easier for readers to find specific passages very quickly. This reflects the fact that books were increasingly being used as reference materials. So books were no longer just being read for leisure and enjoyment. They were being used as practical resources. Again, the portable Bible reflects all of these changes.

The result was a portable, hand-held Bible that was arguably the first mass-produced book in Europe. Now I should note that these Bibles were composed in Latin. Up to this point, we still don't have a complete Bible in the English language, but we're getting close to one. These small portable Bibles were being produced in Paris in the 1230s, and the shape, size and arrangement of the book has changed very little in the eight centuries since then.

I should note that the average household in England and France actually preferred a slightly different book over the Bible, and that was the Psalter. The Psalter was a small illuminated book which mainly consisted of the Book of Psalms. Thus the name Psalter. But it also usually included a calendar in the front that listed the saints' days for the year. The saints' days were almost always written in red ink. And these books were so common, that people started to refer

to those important saints' days as "red letter days." And that gave us the modern term "red letter day" to refer to a notable or important day.

In fact, the use of red ink was really important during this period. It was a way of highlighting parts of the text. Today, we can do that bold print or italics or underlining. But in the Middle Ages, it was done with red ink. Sometimes entire sentences were written in red ink. Titles and chapter headings and side notes were also often written in red ink. This is one of the things that really stands out when you look at a typical Medieval manuscript. This process was called ***rubrication*** from a Latin word meaning 'red.'

The red ink that was used was either made from a very expensive pigment called ***vermilion*** or a cheaper pigment called ***minium***. And that word ***minium*** is important because it contributed several words in the English language. A picture or fancy letter drawn in red ink or ***minium*** was called a ***miniature*** meaning that it was drawn with minium. Since those pictures or designs were composed in books and were not full-sized paintings, they tended to be small. So the word ***miniature*** came to refer to a small picture. And over time, within English, it has come to mean any small version of something. We even shorten that word just ***mini***, as in a mini-skirt or a mini-series or a mini-cooper. That word ***mini*** is not some ancient prefix from Latin or Greek. It's just a shorted version of the word ***miniature***, which is derived from a type of red ink used in the Middle Ages. We may be tempted to assume that it is derived from Latin or Greek because we also have the Latin word ***minimum***, which also means something small. But that word is completely unrelated to the word ***miniature***.

So red ink was very important to Medieval scribes, but of course the most common ink was black ink. In fact, the color black was so synonymous with ink that the word for ink in many languages was based on that color. The Greek word for ink was ***melan***, which meant black. It's also the ultimate source of the word ***melanin***.

Latin had the word ***atramentum*** for ink, which literally meant 'anything used to dye something black.' And in Old English, the word for ink was – you guessed it – ***blæc***. ***Blæc*** meant the color black, just like today, but it was also the word for ***ink***. A scribe wrote with ***blæc***, and an inkwell was a ***blæchorn*** – literally a hollow animal horn used to hold the ink or ***blæc***.

But around the current point in our story in the mid-1200s, that Old English word ***blæc*** started to be replaced with the word ***ink*** from French. In fact, the word ***ink*** is first recorded in an English document from the year 1250. The word ***ink*** is actually derived from the Latin word ***encaustum*** which was a particular type of ink used in the Middle Ages. The Latin root word also gave us the word ***caustic*** which means 'biting or burning.' And ***encaustum*** was a type of ink that had an acidic quality that burned into the vellum or parchment. , The original process is not fully known or understood. The Roman writer known as Pliny the Elder wrote that it was a kind of painting executed by fire or heat. It isn't clear how fire or heat was applied to the painting or manuscript, but the ink literally burned or sank into the parchment. So it was permanent and couldn't be erased. The term ***encaustic*** came to refer to any type of permanent writing, and the word ***caustic*** was a more general term for 'burning.' That Latin word ***encaustum*** was shortened to just ***enque***

in French, which passed into English around the year 1250 as ***ink***. And ***ink*** gradually replaced the word ***blæc*** as the preferred English term for the liquid used by scribes.

Of course, the word ***black*** lives on as a name of a color. In earlier episodes, I noted that the word ***black*** is cognate with the French word ***blanc*** and the Spanish word ***blanco*** which both mean 'white.' This is one of those linguistic paradoxes which is apparently explained by the fact the original Indo-European word meant 'to burn.' Latin inherited the word in the sense of a bright flame which produced Romance words meaning 'white.' But the Germanic languages inherited the word in the sense of something scorched or burnt which produced the English word meaning 'dark or black.' In addition to the word ***black***, Old English also used the words ***sweart*** and ***wann*** to refer to the same color.

Since Old English used the word ***black*** to refer to dark things, that meant that it needed a separate word for white or bright things, and that was the word ***white*** – actually ***hwit*** in Old English. So ***black*** and ***white*** are both Old English words.

And I talked about the importance of red ink in Medieval manuscripts. Well the word ***red*** is also an Old English word. It comes from the same Indo-European root as the French word for 'red' which is ***rouge***. The root also produced the word ***ruby*** for a red gemstone, and ***rust*** for the reddish material that occurs on old iron.

The main point here is that the words ***black***, ***white*** and ***red*** were used by the Anglo-Saxons. And you might assume that all of our basic color terms go back to Old English, but as we'll soon see, they don't. Now you might assume that some Old English words for colors have been replaced with loanwords, but in actuality, Old English didn't even have common words for some of the basic colors we use today – like blue and orange. So what was going on there? Why didn't English have words for those basic colors?

Well, I'll try to explain why in a moment. But let me just note here that English was not really unusual in this regard. The connection between language and color is fascinating, and some linguists have tried to figure out why some languages don't have words for basic colors. But before we explore that linguistic issue, let me explain why color was so important to Medieval bookmakers.

As I noted earlier, Medieval books weren't just collections of words. They were also works of art. Drawings and illustrations filled the pages. And these weren't just scribbles or little decorations. They were elaborate designs, and on many pages, there were more illustrations than there were words. This is obviously something that is better appreciated if you see it rather than having it described to you. So if you're not familiar with these types of illustrations, I would encourage you to google "Medieval manuscripts" or "Medieval illuminations" to get a sense of this type of artwork.

These illustrations brought color to the page and were intended to attract the eye of readers. We have to keep in mind that most people were still illiterate – or barely literate – especially given that most books were written in Latin. Even a basic knowledge of Latin might not be enough to

fully understand what the text said. So pictures were sometimes just as important as the text itself. It illustrated the subject matter, and sometimes the pictures were more interesting than the words themselves. Even if you couldn't read, you could enjoy the drawings of exotic animals in a bestiary. And in a Bible or Psalter, you could see familiar Biblical stories depicted in color. In fact, some religious books were literally picture books – telling the stories of the Bible through illustrations. So the illustrations were a fundamental part of these manuscripts.

Of course, these types of illustrations weren't new. They had been used for several centuries. But during the 1200s and 1300s, they started to become even more elaborate and sophisticated. Some scholars suspect that the illustrations became more elaborate during this period because professional illuminators rather than monks were putting them together.

The illustrations sometimes served a very practical purpose. Most workshops employed a proofreader who would read over the manuscript and look for errors which were usually missing words. Those types of errors were common because a new manuscripts was usually copied from an existing manuscript. And in the process of copying, it was easy to miss a word or sentence. These mistakes are sometimes a good thing for modern scholars because it can help to piece together the history when several copies of the same manuscript are found. If several versions all contain the same mistake or missing word, then scholars can usually discern that they are all connected. They were all made from the same original source document which contained the error.

Anyway, scribes tried to fix those mistakes if they could catch them. If a word was misspelled, the scribe would simply make the correction over the existing word. But if a word was omitted, there might not be enough room to add it in. So the scribe would often write the missing word in the margin and draw a finger pointing to where the word was to be inserted.

But sometimes, the scribe left out an entire sentence or passage. Uh-oh. How do you fix that without re-doing the whole page? Well, you call in the illustrators. The scribe would often write out the missing passage in a blank space in the margin and include a small erasable note to the illustrator explaining how to incorporate the passage into the main body of the text.

In some surviving manuscripts, the passage is framed in a box, and two small men are shown carrying the box toward the main text. A third man is shown next to the main text pointing to where the missing passage belongs. In another manuscript, a missing sentence was added at the bottom of the page. The illustrator then framed the text in a decorative box, and he or she drew ropes from the box to the place where sentence was omitted. A team of little men were then drawn near the point where the sentence was to be inserted, and they are depicted as pulling the ropes connected to the box to try to get the sentence into the right place. These little drawings are like early cartoons – a light-hearted way to solve a practical problem that plagued Medieval scribes – even the professional ones. So the scribes and illustrators worked together to produce these types of books.

In fact, the main scribe had to account for the illustrations and decorations that were to be added later. He or she had to leave space of the drawings. And that usually meant leaving a large blank

space in the upper left corner of the page where a new chapter began. It also meant that the scribe had to remember to leave out the first letter of the first word in the first sentence. So for example, if the first page of a Bible began with the words "In the Beginning...," the scribe had to remember to leave a big blank space and start the sentence with the letter 'n' followed by the words "the" and "beginning." That's because the first letter of the first word was almost always illuminated. In other words, the 'I' in the phrase "In the beginning" would be drawn in later by the illustrator. It would be much larger than the actual text written by the scribe – sometimes taking up a large portion of the entire page. It would be drawn in a very elaborate font, and it would be decorated with lots of fancy designs and patterns and flourishes. Sometimes figures and entire scenes would be incorporated into the design. This type of initial letter was a work of art in itself.

Again, these types of decorated letters sometimes served a more practical purpose. It enabled a reader to locate the point where a new paragraph or chapter began.

I should note here that the word ***letter*** was a brand new word in the English language at the current point in our story in the early 1200s. In fact, the Ancrene Wisse contains one of the first known uses of the word in the English language. Layamon's Brut had used the word ***letter*** in the sense of a written statement – when you write a letter to someone. But the Ancrene Wisse used the word ***letter*** in the other sense as a letter of the alphabet. So the word ***letter*** has been used in both ways since the early 1200s. This new word ***letter*** gradually replaced the Old English word for a letter which was ***boc-stæf*** – literally a 'book staff.' A ***staff*** usually meant a walking cane, so it was often curved and bent. And when the Roman alphabet was first introduced to the Anglo-Saxons, they apparently thought that the various letters sometimes resembled little walking canes or staffs, so they called them staffs. And the staffs used to make words in a scroll or book were called ***boc-stæf***. But again, that term was replaced by the word ***letter*** around the current point in our story.

As I noted, Medieval manuscripts made a point to decorate or illuminate the initial letter at the beginning of a page or chapter. The letter was depicted as a fancy uppercase letter – what we might also call a ***capital*** letter today. And that elaborate capital letter marked the beginning of a new chapter. Umm. ***Capital*** and ***chapter***. Do you sense a connection there? Well, you should. Because they are both cognate, and in fact, the word ***chapter*** first appeared in English documents as ***capitul***. That's how closely related the words are. Both of these words have their origin in Latin, and they were being used in early Middle English around the current point in our story in the early 1200s.

The words ***capital*** and ***chapter*** have their ultimate origin in the old Latin word ***caput*** meaning 'head.' We've seen that root word a lot in the podcast, and here we see it again. It has given us words like ***chief*** and ***chef*** and ***chapeau*** and ***cape*** and ***chapel***, just to name a few. You might also remember that Latin ***caput*** is also cognate with the English word ***head***. Both words came from the same Indo-European root word.

So in almost all the words derived from ***caput***, there is some connection to the head or the 'head place' meaning the primary place. Today we have both of those senses in the word ***capital***.

Capital punishment is punishment that causes death, traditionally by removing the convicted person's head. So ***decapitation*** – literally 'the removal of the head' – was a type of ***capital*** punishment. And today, the main city of government administration is the ***capital*** city. We might even refer to a place where government business is conducted as a ***capitol*** building.

Well, in Medieval manuscripts, any prominent object standing at the head or top of the page was also called a ***capital***. And since that object was usually a large elaborately decorated letter, that type of letter came to be called a ***capital*** letter. Today, it simply means any uppercase letter – which is larger and more prominent that a lowercase letter. But originally, it had more to do with its location on the page. The fact that it was big and fancy is the sense that has been retained over time in the modern use of the term ***capital letter***.

So that takes us to the word ***chapter*** which is derived from the same root, and in fact was initially rendered as ***capitul***. The first thing we should note is that ***chapter*** begins with a C-H sound, unlike c***apital*** which begins with a C-A or /ka/ sound. Well, by this point, we should instinctively know why that is. The Latin C-A sound became a C-H sound in the central dialects of France, including the dialect spoken around Paris. And this is another one of the Parisian forms that was starting to enter English in the early 1200s.

So what's the connection between a chapter of a book and the Latin word for 'head?' Well, it has to do with the fact that a chapter is the primary or main division of a book. If you break down a book into its major components, you would begin with the various chapters, then the paragraphs, then the sentences, then the words, then the letters. So the chapter is the main part of the book in the same way that the head was thought to be the main part of the body. And as I noted earlier, a new chapter was often marked with a large illuminated letter which was also a 'capital' letter in the sense that it was located at the head of the page. So book ***chapters*** and ***capital*** letters are connected thanks to those illuminated letters in Medieval manuscripts.

As I noted, the initial scribe would leave a blank space for the illustrator to draw in the letter at a later time. Sometimes the scribe would leave very specific instructions about the design that he or she wanted the illustrator to draw. The illustrator would then do an initial sketch or outline of the design with a type of pencil. This allowed small changes to be made if necessary. Then he or she would go over the outline with a thin ink to better establish the design. Then the same illustrator or another illustrator would started adding color to the drawing. Traditionally, this began by adding gold leaf to the image. Of course, gold leaf is gold that has been beaten into a very thin sheet as thin as paper or even thinner. It was a delicate material, and it required a skilled artisan to apply it correctly.

The application of gold leaf helps to explain why these are called ***illuminations***, because they literally illuminated the page. When held up to the light, the gold leaf would shine. So technically speaking, an illuminated letter had gold leaf, but gold leaf was expensive, so it became common to use a yellow or gold paint as a substitute in lieu of the real thing.

Interestingly, even when yellow or gold paint was used, it was still applied first before the other colors. So it was treated the same as gold leaf. So now, I've introduced a couple of more colors

to the story – yellow and gold. And you might remember from an earlier episode of the podcast that both of those words are also cognate, and they are both native to Old English. The original Indo-European root word was something like ***ghel**, and it meant 'to shine.' It produced the Old English words ***gold***, ***golden*** and ***gilded***. But in Old English, when that hard 'g' sound appeared before a front vowel – like E or I – it often shifted forward and became a 'y' sound. That's how we got the word ***yellow*** with a 'y' sound at the front. So in our group of primary colors that come from Old English, we have ***black***, ***white***, ***red***, and now we can add ***yellow***.

I should also remind you that ***yellow*** and ***gold*** are also cognate with the word ***yolk*** as in an egg yolk. The word ***yolk*** was originally ***geolca*** (/yeh-ol-ca/) – spelled G-E-O-L-C-A. So that G originally came before an E, and that's why it begins with a 'y' sound today. The word ***yolk*** literally meant 'the yellow part,' of course it was the yellow part of an egg. And I mention that connection because Medieval illuminators and painters used egg yolks and egg whites as a binder for paint. They had colored pigments, and they added water to the pigment, but they also need something to bind those pigments together to make paint, and egg whites and yolks were a standard ingredient in those paints for centuries.

I should also remind you that the word p***aint*** was a brand new word in the language at this point in our story. It was borrowed from French, and the verb ***paint*** was first used in the Owl and the Nightingale. When you paint a picture, you get a ***painting***, and the noun ***painting*** was used for the first time in the Ancrene Wisse.

And paint was the last thing added to an illuminated letter. Generally speaking, the paler colors came first – yellows, light browns and light greens. ***Brown*** and ***green*** are also Old English words going back to the original language of the Anglo-Saxons. But ***brown*** didn't refer to a specific color at the time. It simply meant 'dark or dusty.' The word ***brown*** didn't acquire its modern color sense until the late 1300s. So at the current point in our story, an illuminator would not have described that color as ***brown***. Depending on the shade, it might be described as a type of red or black or even yellow.

However, he or she would have had no problem describing the color green as ***green*** because ***green*** had that same sense in Old English. I noted in an early episode of the podcast that the word ***green*** is related to the words ***grass*** and ***grow***. They are all Old English words, and they are all cognate having evolved from a common Indo-European root word that meant 'to grow' or 'to become green.' So there was always a sense of color in words like ***grass*** and ***grow***. And in English, we sometimes we refer to a large grassy area as a ***green***. A specific area of a golf course is a ***green*** or ***putting green***. And the person who takes care of a golf course is a ***greens keeper***. So the color green has an ancient connection to green plants.

That gives use five colors that were identified by common words in Old English – ***white***, ***black***, ***red***, ***yellow***, and ***green***. So an English illuminator in the early 1200s would have used those same words to describe the colors that he or she was adding to that elaborate letter that was being created. But what happened when the illuminator added those final darkest colors to the letter – when he or she added the deep blues and purples and bright oranges? Well, he or she wouldn't have used native English words because the original language of the Anglo-Saxons didn't have

common words for those colors. And this is where things get interesting. Those colors would probably have been described as shades of black, or green or yellow or red, depending on the specific shade. But really? No blue or purple or orange? Well, no.

Now to be a little more specific, the Anglo-Saxons did have some words they could use for some of those colors, but they were technical terms used by artists or dye makers or other persons who needed specific color terms. For example, Old English had the word ***hæwan*** which could refer to blue or bluish-gray or even green. And the word ***woad*** could also be used to refer to a shade of blue. But again, when those terms are found in an Old English text, they usually refer to pigments and dyes. They had a more specific usage. Anglo-Saxons didn't describe the sky as ***hæwan*** or the ocean as ***woad***. Those words had a much more restricted sense, sort of like when we use words like ***fuchsia***, or ***mauve*** or ***chartreuse***. Those words represent specific colors, but they tend to have specific technical uses, and they're not words used in common everyday conversations to describe the color of things – at least not by most people.

Now if it seems odd to you that the early Anglo-Saxons didn't have common words for colors like blue, and purple and orange, well it also seemed odd to many linguists. And linguists also noticed that other languages also lacked common words for basic colors, at least at earlier points in their history.

So in 1969, a couple of linguists named Brent Berlin and Paul Kay decided to study this issue in detail. They looked at a variety of languages around the world, and they found something very interesting. They concluded that almost all cultures introduce color terms into their language in the same general order. Now again, they focused on common color terms used by all speakers in a given language, not technical or specialized terms. So in other words, they looked at the color terms that a small child might use, like ***red*** and ***green*** and ***blue***, not specialized terms like ***fuchsia*** or ***chartreuse*** which might only be used by a small group of those speakers.

They found that some languages have as few as two common words for color. And in those languages, one of those words always meant 'white or bright' and the other word always meant 'black or dark.' So words for 'white' and 'black' are pretty-much universal.

The researchers then found that some languages only have three common words for colors, and in all of those languages the words represent the colors white, black and red.

They then found that some languages only have four common words for colors, and in those languages the words represent the colors white, black, red and either yellow or green.

Then they found that some languages have only five common words for colors, and in those languages the words represent the colors white, black, red and both yellow and green.

Languages that have six terms add the color blue. Those with seven add the color brown. Those with more than that add the colors purple, orange, pink and so on.

So this study suggested that as languages develop over time, they tend to add more and more common words for basic primary colors. And they tend to add those words in a specific order. First black and white, then red, then yellow and green, then blue, then brown and the other colors. And English worked in the same order. It started off with black, white, red, yellow and green. And that was the state of things at the current point in our story in the early 1200s.

Then around the year 1300, it added the word ***blue*** from French, and not surprisingly, the word ***blue*** is actually a Frankish word related to the English word ***black***, so in that sense we can see how at least the darker shades of blue were once seen as a shade of black. A short time later, in the late 1300s, the word ***brown*** started to be used to refer to a specific color. Around the same time, the word ***violet*** also entered English from the flower known as a violet. The word ***orange*** didn't entered English as a color term until the 1500s. It was taken from the color of oranges that were being imported from the Mediterranean. So the fruit came first, then the color.

So English has followed the same pattern recognized by the Berlin and Key in their classic study of color words. The only real exception is the word ***purple***. ***Purple*** tends to be one of the last color words to become commonly accepted within a language, but English borrowed the word ***purple*** early on from Latin during the late Anglo-Saxon period. So the Anglo-Saxons did have the word ***purple***. But they only had that word because the purple was closely associated with Roman emperors, and then was adopted as a royal color by many European kings. So it had a specific use that was imported from across the Channel.

That allowed the word to come in a little bit early because of a unique set of events. Had that color not been so closely associated with European royalty, English probably would not have had a common word for that color until the late Middle English period.

Now there is one other interesting aspect about the order in which color terms enter a language. It happens to be the same order used by Medieval bookmakers when they added color to the pages of a manuscript.

Remember that they started with a clear or almost white piece of parchment. Then they added black ink known as ***blæc*** in Old English. Then the scribe added red ink to mark the highlighted portions – the process called ***rubrication***. Then the illuminator was called in to decorate the manuscript. He or she added either gold leaf or yellow paint. Then the illuminator added pale colors like light green, and finally the darker colors were added – blues, browns, purples, oranges, and so on. So from white to black to red to yellow to green to blue and orange, that's same order in which those color words enter most languages. So in that sense, one of those beautiful illuminated manuscripts was essentially a metaphor for the English language itself. Those artists added color to the page in the same way that the English speakers added color to the English language.

And with that, I'm going to conclude this episode about the Medieval book trade and the role of color in early Middle English. I should mention that I'll have much more to say about the colors blue, violet and orange in a future episode because all of those terms came into the language a bit later. So stay tuned for that discussion.

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