THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 109: THE ROMANTIC WARRIORS

EPISODE 109: THE ROMANTIC WARRIORS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 109: The Romantic Warriors. In this episode, we're going to look at the rise of English romance in the late 1200s. Over the prior century or so, Medieval romances had become all the rage in the courts of Europe. That included stories about Charlemagne, and the legends of King Arthur and his knights. Those stories mixed together themes of bravely and warfare with elements of chivalry, love and romance. The stories were popular throughout Europe, including the English court, but they weren't composed in English. That finally started to change around the current point in our story in the late 1200s. For the first time, romantic literature started to be composed in English. And that also included songs with romantic themes. So this time, we'll explore the birth of English romance. And we'll also look at the early reign of Edward I – a king who was considered a brutal oppressor by some and a romantic warrior by others.

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 this time, let's return to our overall historical narrative and the end of the reign of Henry III. As we saw a couple of episodes back, Henry had to deal with a revolt by his barons late in his reign. He was forced to agree to the Provisions of Oxford, and a letter confirming the new political arrangement was sent to the counties. That letter was one of the first government proclamations issued in English since the Norman Conquest. As we saw, the leader of the barons was Simon de Montfort. And he was later killed in a battle when his forces met those led by Henry's son Edward. Edward's victory essentially ended the rebellion. His father Henry resumed his authority as king, but Henry started to withdraw from political life, and that allowed Edward to fill the vacuum and emerge as the dominant figure in the English government.

In the year 1270, Edward left England to head to the Holy Land on Crusade, and he was accompanied by his wife who was also descended from Crusaders. Edward's wife was Eleanor of Castile, so she was from Spain, and her father and great-grandfather had been Crusaders having fought to re-claim Spain from its Muslim rulers. The couple had been married 16 years earlier. It was a political marriage as was common at the time, but it was also somewhat unique in that it seems that couple were actually in love with each other. They were virtually inseparable, and Eleanor often accompanied Edward on his travels and his military excursions. So when Edward headed to the Near East, Eleanor traveled with him.

The Crusade itself never amounted to very much. Edward remained in the region for more than a year, and he organized raids into Muslim territories. But the Crusade was not without drama. Edward was almost killed, but not in battle. It was an assassin that almost ended his life.

One night, Edward lay in bed with Eleanor when a messenger arrived bearing gifts and claiming to have secret information. Edward's servants woke Edward and asked him to meet the visitor. Edward appeared in his nightclothes, but the visitor rushed at Edward with a dagger and stabbed him. Edward responded by punching the man in the head and knocking him to the ground. Edward then grabbed another dagger from a table and stabbed the attacker – killing him on the spot.

Now I tell you this story for two reasons. First, it illustrates Edward's reputation as a fierce warrior who killed would-be assassins with own hands. The other reason I tell you this story is because, according the account of a chronicler known as the Templar of Tyre, Eleanor rushed into action to save her husband's life. Apparently, it was feared that the dagger that struck Edward was poisoned. So Eleanor sucked the blood from the wound to remove any poison before it could take effect. Now modern scholars are skeptical of this account and suspect that Eleanor didn't actually suck any poison from Edward's wound, but the story itself shows how close the couple were and how much affection they had for each other.

A short time after the attack, the couple headed back to England, but they took their time along the way. While spending some time in Italy in November, Edward received news that his father had died in England. At that point, the couple knew that they would be crowned as the new king and queen as soon as they returned home.

You might think that they would have rushed to England to claim the throne, but that wasn't the case. They continued to take their time. In fact, it took nearly two years for Edward to make his way back to England. That was how stable the country was in his absence, and it was a sign of how much the nobles respected Edward. There was no concern about a new challenge from the barons while he was away.

Edward eventually returned home and was officially crowned as king in August of 1274. He thereby became Edward I. And I should probably note the obvious which is that he is known as Edward I even though he was actually the third English king named Edward. You might remember Alfred the Great's son was named Edward, and technically he was the first King Edward. And of course, there was Edward the Confessor. But the numbering of kings usually applies to those who reigned after the Norman Conquest, so even though he was the third Edward to rule England, he is known to history as Edward I.

He was also the first Plantagenet king to have an English name. His predecessors included Williams, and Henrys and Richards – all French names. But Edward had a native Anglo-Saxon name, and that was because his father Henry adored Edward the Confessor, and he named his son after the former Anglo-Saxon king.

Edward was also known by the nickname "Longshanks," which literally meant 'long-legs' or 'long-legged.' I've noted before that the word ***leg*** is actually a Norse word. Before it was borrowed into English, the original Old English word for a leg was ***scanca*** – or as it we know it today – ***shank***. So the nickname "Longshanks" meant 'long-legs' because Edward was very tall. His tomb was actually opened several centuries later in 1774, and when the tomb was opened, his

bones indicated that he about 6 feet 2 inches tall, which meant he was about 6 inches taller than the average man of his time.

Now admittedly, most of the kings and queens I've discussed in the podcast are obscure figures from Medieval history. But there is a chance that you might already know a little bit about Edward I – especially if you're a fan of movies set during this period. If you've ever seen the movie Braveheart, you might recall that Edward was the English king who was trying to conquer Scotland and meeting fierce resistance from the Scots in the process. Well, even though the film takes a lot of liberties with the story, the movie is based on actual events. Most of those events took place later in Edward's reign. So we'll look at those developments in a future episode.

But Edward's claims to all of Britain were on full display from the very beginning of his reign. Before Edward turned his attention north to Scotland, he first took aim at Wales in the west. Wales had always been a thorn in the side of English kings. From time to time, English kings claimed the right to rule Wales, and they demanded that they local rulers recognize the English king as their overlord. Sometimes, the English kings invaded the region and forced the issue But inevitably, the Welsh rulers would rise up and rebel and re-assert their independence. That's what happened when the barons rebelled against Edward's father Henry a few years before. The Welsh ruler named Llywelyn had formed an alliance with the Simon de Montfort.

So when Edward came to power, he already bore a grudge against the Welsh prince. Llywelyn then refused to recognize Edward as his feudal lord. And Llywelyn also broke an earlier agreement to provide a tribute payment to the English crown.

Very soon after becoming king, Edward invaded Wales with the intention of subduing the Welsh rebels. His Welsh campaigns began in 1277, and he ultimately forced Llywelyn to pay homage.

A short time later, Llywelyn rose in rebellion again. This time, Edward intended to put an end to the rebellions once and for all. He no longer claimed to be some type of feudal lord over the region. He wanted to crush the rebels and completely conquer the region. He wanted to govern Wales directly and bring it under the authority of the English crown.

He raised a large army and invaded for a second time. And this time, the conquest was permanent. Edward organized a massive and multi-faceted invasion. He broke the power of the Welsh rulers, and Llywelyn was killed in battle. By the spring of 1283, all of Wales was in Edward's hands. And it was brought under permanent English rule.

Thereafter, the title "Prince of Wales" no long applied to the local Welsh rulers. It was a title that Edward bestowed upon his son and eventual heir to the throne. So the tradition of English kings designating their heir as the "Prince of Wales" really began with Edward.

In order to secure his hold on Wales, Edward directed the construction of a series of enormous castles throughout the region. They were designed to intimidate the people and to discourage any further resistance. It was the same strategy used by William the Conqueror, and many of those castles remain to this day.

So we find ourselves about a decade into Edward's reign. And from the very beginning, Edward established himself as a warrior and conqueror – and also a loyal husband devoted to his wife.

In fact, in many respects, these were basic elements of Medieval romances. They usually featured a king or knight engaged in some type of heroic or daring activity. And that warrior was usually guided by notions of bravery and chivalry. And at the same time, he was usually in love with a maiden or noble lady, and the hero's bravery and daring were usually designed to win the love and affection of the lady. In the Arthurian legends, the central figure was often one of Arthur's knights. So as Arthurian romances developed during this period, there was increasing emphasis on the knights, and less of a focus on Arthur himself. Figures like Lancelot and Percival and Gawain emerged as the leading figures in many of these stories. But these stories were mostly composed in languages like French – not English.

In fact, up until this point, there really had not been a romance composed in English. Layamon's Brut was the first telling of the Arthurian legend in English. It had been composed about a century earlier, but it wasn't really a romance. It was based on Geoffrey of Monmouth's original version of the story, and it was more of an epic tale with Arthur as conqueror. The early development of the Arthurian legend into Medieval romances really took place in France with French writers like Chretien de Troyes.

But around the current point in our story, romantic literature finally started to appear in English. And interestingly, that new literature was not part of the Arthurian legend. It was a completely different story called King Horn. Since this is generally considered to be the first English romance, I want to take you through the poem, and I also want to look at the language that was used in the poem to show how English was evolving during this period.

The first thing I should note is that we know very little about the ultimate origin of this story. Most of the characters and locations in the poem are fictional. However, the poem does specifically set part of the story in Ireland And most of the other places mentioned in the story are usually associated with the Celtic areas of western Britain like Wales, Cornwall and far southwestern England. Many scholars think the story is native to Britain and probably Celtic in origin.

The poem itself has an uncertain date. The manuscripts that contain the three surviving versions of the poem all date to the early 1300s, but scholars are confident that the poem itself was composed in the 1200s. Some suggest the first half of the 1200s, but the modern trend is to date it a bit later – perhaps around the time that Edward was completing the conquest of Wales.

Now all three surviving versions of the poem tell the same basic story, but they vary quite a bit from line to line. And that suggests that the poem originally passed in the oral tradition before it finally started to be written down around the current point in our story. We get a sense of the oral nature of the poem in the first few lines. The poem begins:

All be they of cheer
that to my song you hear
A song I shall to you sing
of Murry the king.

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

Alle beon he blithe
That to my song lythe!
A sang ich schal you singe
Of Murry the Kinge.

Now this type of opening was common for poems or songs that were sung by a minstrel to an audience. He invites his audience to listen to his song and be entertained by it. So again, this appears to be a song that was transcribed at some point in the mid to late 1200s.

We're told that the story begins with Murry – the king of Sudene. Again, this is a fictional location, but many scholars associate it with either Devon or Cornwall – so somewhere is the southwestern part of Britain. And in the poem, we soon find out that King Murry's son was named Horn. Horn is a young man, 15 years old, and most fair and admirable. According to the poem:

There was no thane fairer than he was
He was bright as the glass
He was white as the flower
Rose red was his color
He was fayr and also bold
And he was 15 winters old
In all the kingdoms
there was like him none
Twelve companions he had
And by Horn they were all led
All were sons of rich men
And all were fair men.

Fairer nis non thane he was:
He was bright so the glas;
He was whit so the flur;
Rose red was his colur.
He was fayr and eke bold,
And of fiftene winter hold.
In none kinge riche
Nas non his iliche.
Twelf feren he hadde
That he alle with him ladde,

Alle riche mannes sones,
And alle hi were faire gomes

By the way, this passage contains the first use of the word ***color*** in the English language. The Old English word was ***hue*** which still survives, but ***color*** is the more common word today.

Also note the final word ***gomes*** meaning 'men.' We've actually seen that word before – a long time ago. The word was ***guma*** in Old English, and it meant 'man.' And you might remember that ***guma*** – or ***gomes*** here – ultimately became the second part of ***bridegroom*** which was literally 'the bride's man.' And over time, that compound word was shortened to just ***groom***. The word started to acquire its 'r' sound after the 'g' in the 1500s. So that's how an Old English word for a 'man' acquired a modern sense as 'the man in a wedding ceremony.'

Now after introducing us to Horn and his immediate family, we are told that their kingdom was invaded by brutal warriors. King Murry is killed, but Horn is spared. Rather than being killed, he and his 12 companions are forced into exile. They are given a boat which they row until they eventually come to the kingdom of Westernesse. There the king is named Almair, and he welcomes Horn and his companions. King Almair is impressed with Horn, and he soon becomes a favorite at court.

The king's daughter is named Rymenhild, and after a period of time, she falls madly in love with Horn. She sends messengers to bring Horn to her. We then have the following passage:

Rymenhild rose to stand
And took him by the hand:
She sat with him on the bed or pelle
And offered wine to drink his fill:
She made him faire cheer
And took him about the neck or swere.
She offered him kisses,
As she lusted with bliss.
"Horn," she said, "without strife,
Thou shalt have me to thy wife."

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

Rymenhild up gan stonde
And tok him bi the honde:
Heo sette him on pelle
Of wyn to drinke his fulle:
Heo makede him faire chere
And tok him abute the swere.
Ofte heo him custe,
So wel so hire luste.

"Horn," heo sede, "withute strif,
Thu schalt have me to thi wif.

Now I hope you can hear how familiar this Middle English passage sounds. The overall sentence structure is close to Modern English and many of the words are familiar. But we still have a few antiquated terms. Instead of ***neck***, the poem uses another Old English word which was ***swere***. Both words meant 'neck,' and both go back to Old English, but ***swere*** or ***swire*** has largely disappeared from English over time.

The passage also uses the word ***pelle*** which meant 'fine cloth,' and in this context presumably meant bed covering or bed sheets. The word still exists as a ***pall*** which is a fine sheet that is sometimes used to cover a casket. Of course, that gave us the term ***pallbearer***.

You might also notice the continued use of the Old English pronouns. The poem doesn't generally use the modern pronoun ***she***. It tends to use the older pronoun ***heo***. So the older pronoun forms were still in common use.

Now returning to the poem, Princess Rymenhild has declared her love for Horn and proposed to him. Horn loves her too, but he faces a predicament. Her father the king doesn't know that Horn is an exiled prince. He thinks Horn is a peasant or 'thrall.' So Horn realizes that he cannot marry a princess given his current status. He replies:

I am come from a peasant or thrall
And a foundling befall.
It would not be naturally found
For you as my spouse to be bound.
It would be no fair wedding
Betwixt a thrall and a king.

Ich am icome of thralle
And fundling bifalle.
Ne feolle hit the of cunde
To spuse beo me bunde.
Hit nere no fair wedding
Bitwexe a thral and a king.

Let me note that this passage contains the word ***spuse*** or 'spouse.' That's a French word which we sometimes use in place of native words like ***husband*** and ***wife*** – especially if we want to sound a little more formal. This isn't the first use of the term in English, but it was a relatively new word in the language at this time. It is also found in the Ancrene Wisse and a few other documents from the early 1200s.

So despite his love for the princess, Horn expresses his reservations about becoming her spouse. Upon hearing Horn's reply, the princess swoons, and her heart is broken. But Horn offers a possible solution to their dilemma. If she will help him to become a knight, then they can be

married. She promises that he will soon be made a knight. She has her father's steward make an appeal on Horn's behalf. And the king agrees to make Horn and his companions knights. A short time later, they are all knighted.

Princess Rymenhild then calls again for Horn. She expresses her love and says he should honor his promise to marry her. Horn the replies with the following passage:

"Rymenhild," quoth he, "be still!
I will do all thy will,
Also as it may by chance
With spear I shall first ride,
And my knighthood prove,
Before I begin to woo thee.

Now here's the original Middle English:

"Rymenhild," quath he, "beo stille!
Ich wulle don al thi wille,
Also hit mot bitide.
Mid spere I schal furst ride,
And mi knighthod prove,
Ar ich thee ginne to woghe.

So Horn basically says, "I will marry you like I said, just not right now." He says that a knight must prove his worthiness to his lover. This was the traditional notion that a knight had to win the love of his maiden though his bravery and heroic actions. So Horn is saying that he must prove himself in this manner first, then he will return to marry her.

Now this passage sets up the events that are commonly found in Medieval romances, but it also does something else. It shows a very interesting and important development in the language. And that development is the early use of our modern future tense. Specifically, the use of the words ***shall*** and ***will*** to indicate that something will take place in the future.

Now back when we looked at Old English, we saw that English had specific ways to indicate present tense and past tense by adding an inflectional ending to the verb.

For present tense, most of those inflectional endings have disappeared over time. So today, we can just use the basic verb – what we might call the infinitive. So for the verb ***jump***, if we want to indicate that the action is happening right now, we can just use that basic verb form. "I jump." "You jump." "We jump." "They jump." The only exception is third person singular where we add an 's' to the end. "He/she/it jumps." So we do still use that inflection to help us mark present tense.

For past tense, we add a different inflectional ending – usually E-D. So "I jumped," "You jumped," "They jumped." Sometimes, we add a 't' like in "I slept" or "You slept."

But notice that we don't have an ending to mark future tense – to indicate that the action will take place at some point in the future. Some other Indo-European languages have a verb ending that will do that, but like other Germanic languages, English doesn't have that type of ending because the original Germanic language didn't have a future ending either.

So how did the Anglo-Saxons indicate future tense? Well, they just used the present tense. In some situations, they could add a time element to the sentence to make it clear that the action was to take place in the future. So the person might say something like "I jump tomorrow" or "I jump next week." But in most cases, the speaker simply relied upon context. In the context of a particular sentence, "I jump" might meant that I am jumping right now, or it might mean that I will jump at some point in the future, or it might mean both. Again, context usually made the time frame clear.

But in early Middle English, a new grammatical feature developed whereby a speaker could indicate future tense by using either the word ***will*** or ***shall*** before the verb. So "I will jump" or "I shall jump." There is actually some indication that this new way of indicating future tense was present in late Old English, but it wasn't common until the 1200s and 1300s.

So why were the words ***will*** and ***shall*** appropriated to this new use? Well, both of those words are Old English words, and they had specific uses in Old English. The word ***will*** indicated a desire or wish to do something. So you might 'will' something to be done. You might also be 'willing' to do it. It could also be used as a noun. So I might impose my 'will' upon you. Well, if you express a 'will' do to something, that action is going to take place at some point in the future. So can see how the word ***will*** often had an implied sense of the future.

In the context of the King Horn poem, it's a small leap from "I will myself to marry you" to "I will marry you." There is a subtle shift in the use of the word ***will*** from the desire to do something in the future to simply a marker of the future tense. In the passage I read to you earlier, Horn says that he will marry Rymenhild. He says "I will do all thy will" – "Ich wulle don al thi wille." He is literally saying, "I will do that that you want me to." And in that sentence, he uses the word ***will*** twice. The first time is to mark the future tense – "I will do." And the second time is the more traditional use of the word – he is going to "do thy will." So we can see the word ***will*** being used both ways in that sentence.

The word ***shall*** also had a more limited sense in Old English. And it's a sense that we still have today. It meant 'must' or 'ought to.' So if you 'shall' do something, you are obligated to do it. We still use the word in that sense – especially in legal documents. For example, a lease provision might provide that the tenant 'shall' pay rent in a specified amount.

Again, the word has that traditional sense of an obligation, but notice that the obligation is satisfied at some point in the future. So again, the word ***shall*** always had that implied sense of the future. It was a small step from "The tenant 'shall' pay rent in the amount of $500" meaning the tenant is obligated to pay that amount – to "The tenant shall pay $500" meaning the tenant is going to do that in the future. So just like with the word ***will***, the word ***shall*** was starting to be used to mark the future tense in early Middle English.

In the same passage from King Horn that I read earlier, Horn says "With spear I shall first ride," – "Mid spere I schal furst ride" – meaning "With my spear, I shall go out." So this is an example of the word ***shall*** being used to indicate future tense.

Now throughout the Middle English period, either ***will*** or ***shall*** could be used to indicate a future action. And there doesn't appear to have any grammatical distinction between the two. But in the early 1600s, an Oxford professor named John Wallis published a grammar guide, and he stated that ***shall*** should be used for first person and ***will*** should be used for second and third person. So "I shall" and "we shall" – but "you will," "he will," "she will," and "they will." Some modern grammar guides still advocate this rule, but it is rarely followed by most Modern English speakers – especially in American English where ***will*** has always been the preferred form in all persons.

By the way, English speakers also created a couple of other ways to express future action. One way was to combine the verb ***to be*** with the word ***going*** and then the main verb. So "I am going to jump." or "He is going to run." This construction started to pop up in late Middle English. In fact, it appeared for the first time in a document composed in the year 1482. So that was a couple of centuries later in our story.

The other future construction found in English is the verb ***to be*** plus the word ***about*** and then the main verb. So "I am about to jump." and "She is about to run." We use this construction to indicate that something is going to happen in the immediate future. And again this construction first appeared later in our story in late Middle English. So around the current point in our story – in the late 1200s – English was relying upon ***will*** and ***shall*** to mark the future tense, and this was still a relatively new development in the language.

Now returning to the story of King Horn, Horn delays his marriage to Rymenhild so he can go out and perform some acts of bravery and prove his worthiness. Rymenhild gives him a ring and asks him to wear it as a sign of his love. She also says that the ring will protect him if he looks at it and thinks of her. Horn then takes his leave.

A short time later, he meets a group of invaders. Horn slays the leader, and then after looking at the rings, he slays a hundred more. He puts the leader's head on a spear and brings it back to the king.

The next day, Horn goes to see Rymenhild. She is upset, and recounts a dream where she caught a fish, but the fish broke through the net and escaped. They both consider the dream to be a bad omen. Horn comforts her and renews his pledge to marry her.

Now one of Horn's companions is named Fickenhild. And he betrays Horn. He tells the king that Horn has seduced Rymenhild and is planning to seize the throne by killing the king and marrying his daughter. The king believes the story and banishes Horn from the kingdom.

Before leaving, Horn visits Rymenhild and tells her that her dream has come true – that he has been banished, and he is going to an unknown country for seven years. He tells her not to wait more than that length of time. They kiss and she faints. The passage reads:

They kissed each other for a while or stound
And Rymenhild fell to the ground.

He custe him wel a stunde,
And Rymenhild feol to grunde.

This passage uses the word ***stunde*** – or ***stound*** – which is an old word for a moment or a short period of time. It's a native English word, but it's related to the word ***instant*** from Latin and French. It's also related to the English word ***stall*** meaning to delay for a short period of time. It's also related to the English word ***stand*** and the French word ***stay***. Now today this word ***stound*** may linger on in a few regional dialects, but it has largely disappeared from standard English.

So after this brief encounter between Horn and the princess, Horn leaves and travels to Ireland where he is welcomed by the local Irish king. While there, he battles and kills a giant and a group of invaders who threaten the kingdom.

A long time passes, and because of Horn's exile from Westernesse, Rymenhild has no contact with him. Meanwhile, her father arranges for her to be married to another king as part of a marriage alliance She doesn't want to go forward with the marriage, but she doesn't have a choice. A few days before the wedding, she sends a messenger to Horn to inform him of the impending marriage.

When Horn receives the message, he leaves to return to Rymenhild and is accompanied by several Irish warriors. He arrives just as the wedding has begun. He dons a disguise, but a gate-keeper on a bridge forbids Horn from entering the Hall where the wedding is taking place. Undeterred, Horn throws the gate-keeper from the bridge. Here's the passage:

Horn went to the gate turn
And that wicket opened or unspurned
The boy he should have to pay
Horn threw him over the bridge
That his ribs he did break
And Horn quickly came through the gate

Now here's the original Middle English version:

Horn gan to þe ȝate turne,
And þat wiket vnspurne.
Þe boye hit scholde abugge;
Horn þreu him ouer þe brigge,

Þat his ribbes him to brake;
And suþþe com in atte gate.

Now this passage is important for one primary reason. The gate-keeper is called a ***boy***, and this is the first known use of the word ***boy*** in the English language. And that may be surprising because ***boy*** is such a common and familiar and short little word that it feels like it should be an Old English word, but it's not found in any Old English documents. It doesn't appear in writing until now – in the mid to late 1200s. The original meaning was more along the lines of a young servant, but over time, its meaning was extended to any young man or male child. So the word ***boy*** appears for the first time in English in this poem – King Horn.

And here's another interesting fact. The word ***girl*** also first appeared around this same time. And again, ***girl*** seems like it should be a native English word because it is such a common and basic word. But apparently, it's not. It isn't found in any Old English documents. The word ***girl*** doesn't appear in King Horn, but it is found for the first time in a story about Thomas Becket contained in a collection of sermons and saint's lives called "The South English Legendary." That manuscript is dated to around the year 1300, so just a few decades after King Horn.

So ***boy*** and ***girl*** arrived in English around the same time in the early Middle English period. And I guess that it is appropriate that ***boy*** and ***girl*** would appear in English around the same time that English romances were starting to appear because both terms can refer to young adults who aren't married yet. But when they first appeared in the language, the words ***boy*** and ***girl*** had very different meanings.

As I noted, the word ***boy*** meant a young servant – usually a male servant – but the emphasis was more on the occupation that the gender. And believe it or not, the word ***girl*** could refer to a child of either gender. So if someone used the word ***girl***, they could actually be referring to a boy or girl. Sometimes a boy was referred to as a 'knave girl.' That general usage was common for about a century. Even in the late 1300s, when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales – he referred to children of both genders as "yonge gerles." But a short time later, the term started to be restricted to young females, and by the late 1400s, it was no longer used to refer to boys.

It is very likely that the word ***girl*** became limited to females as the word ***boy*** became more and more common in English throughout the 1300s. So as ***boy*** shifted from its sense as a servant to its sense as a young male, that allowed the word ***girl*** to become restricted to young females. So it appears that the words ***boy*** and ***girl*** developed in conjunction with each other.

I said that neither word is found in Old English, and the ultimate origin of both words is unknown. There are lots of theories about the origin of those two words, but none of then are generally accepted. For example, Swedish, Norwegian and the Low German dialects all have words similar to ***girl*** that can refer to a young child. So some scholars have speculated that the word ***girl*** is a Germanic word that was probably used in Old English, but it doesn't survive in any Old English documents. That's possible, but the connection between those words is uncertain. And if the word was native to English, the hard 'g' before the 'i' would have probably shifted to

a ‘y’ sound as tended to happen in early Old Englsih. So English would have the word today as ***yirl*** instead of ***girl***.

Along the same lines, Frisian and Dutch have words similar to ***boy*** that mean a servant or young man, so there could be an ancient connection to those words. French also had a word ***embuie*** which referred to someone shackled or chained. So that could also have been an influence. Again, there is no clear indication where the word ***boy*** came from.

All we know for certain is that it appears for the first time in King Horn – in the passage where he throws the boy or servant from a bridge. Returning to the poem, Horn makes his way to the wedding still in disguise. He approaches Rymenhild who doesn’t recognize him. She offers him a horn filled with wine. Horn slips the ring she gave him several years earlier into the drink. He then tells her to “drink to horn of horne” – literally “drink to Horn from the horn.” Rymenhild is confused by that request. She returns to her room and finds the ring in the horn.

She then sends for the strange man who asked her to drink from the horn. Horn arrives and reveal his true identity. He says:

I am Horn, thine own
Me, how can you not know?
I am Horn of Westernesse
In your arms, you me kiss.
They kissed each other
and made much bliss.

Now here’s the original Middle English:

Ihc am horn þin oȝe;
Ne canstu me noȝt knowe?
Ihc am horn of westernesse;
In armes þu me cusse.
Hi custe hem mid ywisse,
And makeden muche blisse

Horn tells her than he has armed men with him, and they will prevent the wedding to the foreign king. Horn and his men then proceed to slay the wedding guests who had betrayed Horn earlier and forced his exile. He then marries Rymenhild. Afterwards, Horn and his Irish warriors return to Horn’s homeland of Sudene and they proceed to re-capture the kingdom that had been lost many years before. Horn becomes king of Sudene and Rymenhild becomes queen. So that’s the story in a nutshell.

As you can see, the poem has a lot of the same elements as epic poetry. There are lots battles and lots of killing, but this poem had a cental love theme that really drives the story. And for the first time, this type of Medieval romance was recorded in English.

Now around the same time that King Horn was being transcribed and preserved for history, a scribe at the Priory of Saint James, near Exeter, came across an old document. It was Papal edict dated about a century earlier to the year 1199. Now we don't what the scribe was doing with that old document, but for some reason, he decided to write down something in brown ink on the back. And what he wrote down was a song – a love song. We don't really know where this song came from, but it was preserved in English on the back of the Papal edict in the last decade or so of the 1200s – so a short time after King Horn was written down. And this song is generally considered to be the oldest surviving love song in the English language.

The song is called "Bryd One Brere" – literally "Bird on a Briar." But the bird in this song is not an actual bird. It is a woman. And in fact, that's a good place to begin the discussion of this song – with the historical link between the word ***bird*** and women. In modern British English, the word ***bird*** is still a commonly used slang term for a woman. And that connection goes back to early Middle English where the word ***bird*** was sometimes used to mean a maiden or girl.

I should also note that a parallel development took place in American English in the early 1900s. During that time, American English began using the word ***chick*** in a similar way. And today, ***chick*** is still sometimes used as a slang term for a girl or woman. I should also note that the word ***hen*** is sometimes used as a derogatory slang term for woman – especially an older woman. So this connection between birds and women is still common in the language today. But why did that connection develop?

Well, to understand how the word ***bird*** came to be used as a slang term for a woman, we have to consider the fact that early Middle English actually had three different words that were pronounced in a very similar way and could all be used to refer to a girl or woman.

Let's start with the word ***bird*** itself – meaning a type of fowl. The first thing to note about the word ***bird*** it that it was rendered two different ways in Old English and Middle English. Sometimes the 'r' came after the vowel like in Modern English. So we find the word spelled as B-I-R-D and probably pronounced something like /beard/. This was especially common in the north of England. But in the south, it was often spelled with the 'r' before the vowel. So there, we often find it spelled B-R-I-D or B-R-Y-D and pronounced something like /brid/. This type of variation where two sounds are sometimes reversed is actually quite common. And in this first English love song, the word was spelled both ways.

So we have ***bird*** rendered as either /beard/ or /brid/. Either way, it could mean a literal bird or it could be used as a slang term for a girl or woman.

Early Middle English also had a very similar word – ***burde*** – which was a poetic term for a woman or lady. So it is only found in poems, not in other documents. This word was usually spelled with a 'u' so it had a slightly different vowel sound. Despite the similarities with ***bird***, most scholars think this word ***burde*** was a distinct word at the time.

And then we have another word – the word ***bride*** or ***bryd***. Again, this in an Old English word, and we still have it today. And just like today, the word meant a woman about to be married or just married.

So all three of these words began with a 'b' and ended with a 'd' and had a 'r' sound in the middle. In that poetic term for a woman – ***burde*** – the 'r' came after the vowel. And in the word ***bride*** or ***bryd***, the 'r' came before the vowel. And the word ***bird*** could be rendered either way – either with the 'r' before the vowel or after the vowel. So if ***bird*** was rendered one way, it was a virtual homonym for ***bride***. And if it was rendered the other way, it was a virtual homonym for that poetic term for a woman.

So you can probably see how birds became associated with women – especially in poetry. It was very easy for a poet to play on those linguistic similarities. When talking about a bird, the audience would instinctively notice the similarity to those other words meaning a girl or woman. So whenever we come across a Middle English poem or song about a bird, there is always a chance that the bird symbolically represents a woman.

And that's definitely the case here with "Bryd One Brere." So let's go through the lyrics of the song – first in Modern English then in the original Middle English. Then I'll play you a version of the song so you can hear the melody. Here's the Modern English translation:

Bird on a briar, bird, bird on a briar,
Mankind comes from love, thus love we crave.
Blissful bird, have pity on me,
Or dig, love, dig for me my grave.

I am so blithe, so bright, bird on briar,
When I see the handmaid in the hall:
She is white of limb, lovely, true,
She is fair and the flower of all.

Might I her at my will have,
Steadfast of love, lovely, true,
From my sorrow, she may save me
Joy and bliss would wear me new.

Now here are the original Middle English lyrics:

Bryd one brere, brid, brid one brere,
Kynd is come of love, love to crave
Blythful biryd, on me thu rewe
Or greyth, lef, greith thu me my grave.

Hic am so blithe, so bryhit, brid on brere,
Quan I se that hende in halle:

Yhe is whit of lime, loveli, trewe
Yhe is fayr and flur of alle.

Mikte ic hire at wille haven,
Stedefast of love, loveli, trewe,
Of mi sorwe yhe may me saven
Ioye and blisse were were me newe.

Now here's a version of the song performed with the original melody. This version comes from a collection called "English Medieval Songs" by Russell Oberlin.

So that's "Bird on a Briar" – the oldest known secular love song in the English language.

Throughout this episode we've explored the concept of romance and love. We've explored the origin of words like ***boy*** and ***girl***, and ***groom*** and ***bride***, and ***spouse***. We've looked at the oldest love song in English. And we went through the oldest romance composed in English – a poem about a warrior and conqueror named Horn who was madly in love with his queen.

And that description of Horn also applies to the English king of this period – Edward I. He was also a warrior and conqueror who deeply loved his wife Eleanor.

But in the year 1290 – about 16 years into Edward's reign – Eleanor suddenly took ill at Nottinghamshire. A short time later, she died in Edward's arms. The decision was made to take her body to Westminster Abbey to be interred. As the procession slowly made its southward toward to London, a distraught Edward followed the procession. He erected a series of crosses to mark the places where her body rested as it made the journey. There were 12 crosses in all which became known as Eleanor Crosses, and some of them are still standing to this day. Edward's despair was reflected in his writings. He later wrote, "My harp is turned to mourning. In life I loved her dearly, nor can I cease to love her in death."

Edward and Eleanor had been inseparable for 36 years. And for the rest of his life, Edward struggled both personally and politically.

Scholars of this period often divide Edward's reign into two distinct periods. The first part of his reign was marked by political and military successes. But around the time that Eleanor died, all of the that started to change. The latter part of Edward's reign was marked by policies that were inconclusive and a foreign policy that was met with rebellion – especially up in Scotland.

Next time, we'll continue to look at some of the developments during the first part of Edward's reign. That was the period when Edward enjoyed many successes, and during that time, he implemented a large number of administrative and legal reforms. And some of those reforms reflect interesting developments in the culture at the time, and those developments were also reflected in the language. So next time, we'll continue to explore how the events of this period shaped the English language. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.