THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 112:
NORTHERN MESSENGER

©2018 Seven Springs Enterprises, LLC

EPISODE 112: NORTHERN MESSENGER

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 112: Northern Messenger. In this episode, we're going to officially move our chronological narrative into the 1300s. We'll continue to look at the reign of Edward I, and we'll see how his plans to conquer and subdue Scotland started to fall apart as Scotland rose in rebellion. A fierce independent streak had always existed in the north, so the Scots didn't need much of a motivation to take up arms against Edward's forces. The distinct culture of the north was reflected in the speech of the people. The people of northern England and southern Scotland spoke a similar dialect of English, and that dialect was quite different from the English spoken in the south of England where the English government was located. During this period, we start to get a sense of just how different the dialect of the north was. Around the time that Scotland rose in rebellion, we have the first document composed in the northernmost dialect of Middle English – a document called Cursor Mundi. And for the first time, we can analyze this dialect and see why the people of the south sometimes had difficulty understanding the English spoken in the north. So this time, we'll look at the Northern dialect of Middle English.

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

Now this time, I want to turn our attention to the north of Britain and explore the very important developments that were taking place there. These developments were political, literary and linguistic. So there's a lot to cover. Let's begin by picking up with Edward's conquest of Scotland in 1296 which we looked at last time. Following that invasion of Scotland, Edward headed across the Channel to secure his rights to Gascony in the south of France. That French invasion quickly fell apart, and Edward and the French king soon agreed to a truce. Several years of negotiations between the two kings followed which ultimately preserved Edward's claims to the region. The agreement that was reached also stipulated that there would be two marriages.

First, Edward, who was now a widower, agreed to marry the French king's sister Margaret. This was an interesting marriage because Edward was 60 years old, and Margaret was in her late teens. But it was the other arranged marriage that had much more important implications for our story – at least in the long term. It was agreed that Edward's son and heir to the throne would marry the French king's daughter. And the reason why this second marriage between the children of the two kings was so important is because it meant that any children born to that marriage would be the grandchildren of both kings with a theoretical claim to both thrones. And that's important because the French royal line – the Capetians – was about to run out of male heirs. When that happened in the early 1300s, it allowed Edward's grandson, Edward III, to claim the French throne. And that set in motion the long series of conflicts between England and France that become known as the Hundred Years War. And that conflict is important to our story because it led to a rise of pro-English and anti-French sentiment in England, and that sentiment ultimately pushed French into the background and allowed English re-emerge as the undisputed language of English government and society.

So this seemingly obscure marriage between Edward's son and the French king's daughter was destined to have some major long-term consequences, and we'll cover all of those in more detail as we move through the 1300s.

Now as Edward was negotiating that settlement with France, he was having to deal with a challenge to his rule up in Scotland. It was a popular uprising led by a man named William Wallace. Interestingly, this was not really a rebellion by the nobles of Scotland. Most of the important nobles were actually descended from Anglo-Normans. I mentioned that way back in Episode 77. The Balliols, the Bruces and soon-to-become-important Stuarts all had Norman connections. And many of those nobles held lands in England as well as Scotland. So initially, many of those prominent nobles were reluctant to join a full-scale rebellion against Edward. That meant that the Scottish 'uprising' was literally that – a rising from the bottom up.

William Wallace was the son of a knight from southern Scotland. He wasn't from a baronial family, but he gathered a lot of followers in the southern part of Scotland. While Edward was away in France, Wallace was able to join forces with another rebel leader from northern Scotland named Andrew de Moray, and together they managed to defeat an English army at Stirling Bridge in September of 1297. After the victory, Wallace was knighted and declared the sole guardian of Scotland. He was also designated as the leader of the Scots army in the absence of the deposed king John Balliol who was in exile. So Wallace emerged as the leader of the rebellion.

The English defeat at Stirling Bridge was the first major sign that Edward's rule in Scotland was tenuous and it was going to require an on-going effort if Edward wanted to keep it under control. It started to become apparent that the conquest of Scotland was never going to be as decisive as the conquest of Wales. Scotland was too big and too far away from the center of English government in the south of England.

In fact, once the rebellion was underway, Wallace actually took the battle across the border to England itself. Shortly after the victory at Stirling Bridge, he led a major raid into northern England. That forced Edward to return to England from France and to march his forces to the north to confront Wallace in the summer of 1298.

Wallace avoided a direct confrontation for as long as he could. Without the full support of the Scots nobles, he was at a miliary disadvantage, especially with the lack of a cavalry. Edward eventually discovered that Wallace's forces were camped near the town of Falkirk in cental Scotland. Edward finally forced Wallace into a face-to-face battle on July 22, 1298 at what became known as the Battle of Falkirk. Edward used his archers and crossbowmen to break Wallace's flanks, and the Scots forces were soon defeated. Many men were killed on both sides of the battle. Edward got his victory and re-established his authority in Scotland, but Wallace managed to escape and the rebellion continued.

By this point, Edward's army was tired and running low on resources. So he withdrew back across the border to Carlisle in northern England. From there, the English forces kept a close eye on the situation in Scotland, and over the next five years, Edward launched three more invasions of Scotland, but none of the invasions were decisive. The Scots had learned a hard lesson from Falkirk. They avoided any large-scale battles that might prove decisive. Edward still claimed that he was the king of the Scots, but he was never able to secure his hold on the region.

Now the events in Scotland are important to the story of English because they eroded the traditional role of Gaelic in the government of Scotland. Most of Scotland spoke Gaelic – or /gæ-lick/ as it's pronounced in Scotland. That was the traditional Celtic language of the region. But in the southern part of Scotland, people spoke English. Back in Episode 77, I discussed how a Scottish military victory about three centuries earlier had moved the border between England and Scotland southward. And when that border moved, the northernmost part of Northumbria became part of southern Scotland, and that included the city of Edinburgh. So all of the English speakers in that region came under Scottish rule. Since then, the people in that southern region of Scotland had continued to speak English, but their Old English language had evolved over time, and it would continue to evolve into what became known as Scots.

That southern region of Scotland was also where the Anglo-Norman influence was the greatest. As I noted, many of the noble families from that region had connections to the nobility of England. And when the Scots king Alexander III died without an heir leaving a power vacuum, the center of power soon shifted to those noble families in the south where people spoke English. For now, French was the official language of the Scottish royal court. But by the end of the 1300s, French has been replaced with the Scots dialect of English, and by the early 1400s, Scots was the official language of the Scottish government.

Now I just referred to Scots as an English dialect, and as I've noted before, there are many in Scotland who would take exception to that. They would refer to Scots as a distinct language. I'm not going to resolve that debate here, and I don't really need to because at the current point in our story, Scots wasn't really a distinct manner of speech yet.

Even though the English speakers in Scotland and Northern England were separated by a political border, their respective dialects were still largely the same around the year 1300. In fact, most modern scholars make no distinction between the English of Scotland and the English of northern England during this period. Both regions are usually lumped together as part of a common dialect region known as the 'Northern' dialect of Middle English.

So as Edward's forces went back and forth across the Scottish border, they would have encountered very little difference in the speech on each side. There may have been some minor differences, but the surviving documents from those regions suggest that the speech was largely the same. That's why this is considered one common dialect region in early Middle English.

Now I noted that scholars have reached this conclusion by examining the surviving documents from those northern regions. But here's the thing. Surviving English documents from those regions are virtually non-existent until the current point in our story. Of course, there are Old

English documents from those regions composed before the Norman Conquest, but as we know, English documents largely disappeared in the wake of that Conquest. And when English documents finally started to reappear, they mostly came from the South and the Midlands. We don't really have a significant piece of literature from the North until the current point in our story around the year 1300.

That document is called Cursor Mundi, and it was composed in the north of England – probably in or around the city of Durham. It provides modern scholars with the first real opportunity to examine the speech of northern England in the post-Conquest period. Now since this document was composed in northern England, you may be wondering how scholars know that the speech was essentially the same across the border in Scotland. Well, the first English documents from Scotland appear in the later part of the 1300s, and those documents show very little, if any, difference in dialect. It's not until the 1400s that Scots really started to become a distinct dialect. We'll look at some of those early Scots documents in a future episode, but for now, let's focus on that document that appeared around the year 1300 called Cursor Mundi.

It's a long poem that recounts much of the world's history as described in the Bible. It begins with an account of the creation and then covers many of the major events of Biblical history. It also pulls in legends and stories from other sources. It survives in many different manuscripts, so it was apparently very popular at the time.

The title comes from a later copy, and even though the poem itself was written in English, the title is Latin. Cursor Mundi literally means the 'Runner of the World' or the 'Messenger of the World.' ***Cursor*** meant 'runner' or 'something that moves,' and it's related to other Latin-derived word like ***course*** and ***current***. In the modern era, English has actually borrowed the word ***cursor*** in its original form for use in computer technology. The cursor on the computer screen is the thing that moves around and lets you modify the content on the screen. We also have it almost in its original form in the word ***cursory*** which means 'quick,' as in a 'cursory review of a document.' And we also have it in the related Latin and French word ***courier*** meaning 'a person who runs errands or delivers messages.' And that word ***courier*** actually captures more of the original sense of the word ***cursor***. Again, it meant a runner or messenger. And in this poem, the word is used in that context because the poem is delivering a message about the world.

The second word ***Mundi*** meant 'world.' We also have the same Latin root in the word ***mundane*** which originally meant 'of this world' or 'belonging to this world,' as opposed to something spiritual. And today, ***mundane*** has more of a sense of something common or routine. So ***mundi*** meant 'world,' and Cursor Mundi meant the 'runner or messenger of the world.'

Now the original manuscript composed in the north of England has been lost, but that original manuscript was copied many times, and several of those copies have survived the centuries. The poet identifies himself as a cleric, but he doesn't specifically state where the poem was composed. As I noted, some scholars think the original version was composed around Durham, but regardless of the exact town or city, there is no doubt that it was the product of northern England. The language itself is a giveaway, but we don't even have to rely upon the dialect of

the poem to reach that conclusion because the poet actually tells us that he wrote it in the dialect of northern England so that the people of the north could better read it and understand it. And in telling us that, he draws a sharp contrast between the language of the north and the language of the south.

He does this in a passage where he explains why he translated a particular text that had been written in a dialect of southern England. The text was a story about the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven upon her death. As I said, the text was composed in the south of England in a dialect that was understandable in the south. But the poet says that he had to translate the story into the dialect of northern England so that it could be understood by the people of the North. Here's that passage about the translated story – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English:

In southern English it was drawn,
and I have turned it into our own
language of the northern people,
who can read no other English.

In suthrin englijs was it drawn
And I haue turnd it till vr aun
Langage of þe norþren lede
þat can nan oþer englijs rede

Now the notion that northern English was very different from southern English should not be a surprise. We've seen references to it before. Nearly two centuries earlier, the great historian William of Malmesbury had written in Latin that "The whole language of the Northumbrians, especially in York, is so grating and uncouth that we Southerners cannot understand a word of it." I mentioned that quote way back in Episode 72, so this was not a new development. But the Cursor Mundi poem gives us our first real opportunity to compare and examine those differences.

But before we start analyzing some of those differences, let me make a few general comments about this north-south linguistic divide. We know that even in the Anglo-Saxon period, the English spoken in the north was different from that spoken in the south. The northernmost dialect of Old English is known as the Northumbrian dialect. Then the Vikings arrived, and this same northern region became part of the Danelaw. And the Norse influence in that region contributed to an even greater linguistic divide. Then in 1066, the Normans arrived from France, and French influences became more common. Through all of this, the Northern dialect continued to evolve – as did all of the other regional dialects. Modern scholars refer to this northernmost dialect as the 'Northern' dialect of Middle English. So the Old English 'Northumbrian' dialect evolved into Middle English 'Northern' dialect.

To this very day, there is still a north-south linguistic divide in England. And I thought it might be a good idea to give you a modern example of northern speech if you're not familiar with the differences. Of course, there is no generic Northern dialect today. Over the past seven centuries, the Northern dialect has fractured into many different regional dialects that sometimes vary from

county to county and city to city. But since many scholars think the Cursor Mundi poet lived in or around Durham, I thought it would be interesting to listen to an actual speaker from that region.

This sample comes from the British Library archives. The British Library maintains a large collection of dialect samples from throughout Britain, and many of them were recorded many years ago, so they sometimes reflect an older form of speech that may be gradually disappearing. This particular clip was recorded in 1954, and the man speaking was a farmer from the Durham region named John Peart. He was born in 1872, so his dialect reflects the speech of the region over a century ago. In this clip, he talks about his life as a farmer. And to help you out a bit as you listen, he describes the process of mowing grass by hand before tractors arrived. He refers to a scythe and a snead. A scythe is a stick with a curved blade at the end, and the snead is the stick or handle of the tool. And you'll notice that when he refers to the blade, he pronounces it /bleed/. So here's the clip:

[JOHN PEART VOICE SAMPLE]

So that's an example of a northern dialect from the county of Durham. Let me give you another quick sample of modern speech in the north of England. This is a voice sample contributed by listener Paul from Yorkshire. Paul gives us a sentence in a Yorkshire dialect, and then in a more standard English dialect:

[VOICE SAMPLE – PAUL FROM YORKSHIRE]

The word ***lake*** meaning 'to play' is indeed a Norse word. And this points to another key feature of northern English dialects. They tend to retain a higher portion of Norse words since the region was once part of the Danelaw. This fact is very apparent in the Cursor Mundi.

The poem survives in its original Northern version, but it soon spread to the south of England where it was copied by a scribe who re-wrote the poem in his southern English dialect. So this southern version allows us to compare the northern and southern dialects, and the comparison can be done line by line. Scholars who have compared the two versions have determined about 9% of the words in the northern version are from Old Norse, compared to only about 4.5% in the southern version. So there are twice as many Norse words in the northern manuscript. *[From "Old English to Standard English," Freeborn, p. 168.]*

The Norse influence in the north is represented by several key features which I have mentioned in earlier episodes. First of all, the Cursor Mundi uses the Norse pronouns ***they***, ***them*** and ***their***, where the southern text uses the more traditional English pronouns ***he***, ***hem*** and ***here***. As we know, those modern 'TH' pronoun forms came from Old Norse, and they came in via the Northern dialect of Middle English. At this point, around the year 1300, they were still largely confined to the north of England.

Another common Norse feature in the Cursor Mundi is the pronunciation of many words with traditional Norse sounds rather than Old English sounds. As we know, Old Norse and Old English were closely-related languages with a very similar vocabulary, but Old English developed certain sound changes that didn't occur in Old Norse. As we saw in the earlier episodes, the hard 'K' sound found in many Germanic words was softened into a 'CH' sound in many Old English words. And the Germanic 'SK' sound was softened to an 'SH' sound . But Old Norse retained those original Germanic sounds, and thanks to that Norse influence, the Northern dialect tended to retain those harder 'K' and 'SK' sounds. So we find ***kirk*** in the north and ***church*** in the south. In Middle English documents, we find northern texts using the word ***skirt*** for the same piece of clothing described as a ***shirt*** in the south. And we'll see more examples of this as we go through a few passages of the Cursor Mundi.

The Northern dialect also gave us a couple of grammatical features that didn't exist in the south. For example, when we make a noun plural, we usually add an 'S' or 'ES' to the end of the word. From ***cat*** to ***cats*** and from ***house*** to ***houses***. Well, that was originally a feature of the Northern dialect. In the south of England, nouns were usually made plural by adding an 'EN' to the end. A few of those southern forms are still hanging around. We have plural words like ***children***, ***brethren*** and ***oxen***. But for the most part, the southern 'EN' ending has lost out to the northern 'S' and 'ES' endings. At the current point in our story around the year 1300, those northern 'S' and 'ES' endings were starting to be used in the south, but they had not become fully accepted yet. Even as late as Shakespeare in the early Modern English period, this was still not a fully settled issue in the south. Shakespeare used ***eyen*** for ***eyes***, ***shoon*** for ***shoes***, and ***housen*** for ***houses***. Again, as we go through portions of the Cursor Mundi, we'll see that the northern poet routinely used the 'S' and 'ES' endings, where the southern translator used the 'EN' ending.

Another northern grammatical feature that eventually spread south also involved an 'S' and 'ES' ending, but in this case, it was the 'S' and 'ES' used for verbs in third person singular. So "he watches" or "she loves." Again, even though this is standard in Modern English, it was once limited to the north of England. The southern forms were different. In the Midlands, people used an 'EN' ending. So instead of "she loves," people would say "she loven." In the far south of England, people would use another verb ending – '-eth' – E-T-H. So they would say "she loveth." So as you traveled from north to south, you would hear the verb form change from ***loves*** to ***loven*** to ***loveth***. Once again, the northern 'S' form spread southward during the Middle English period and became standard over time, but again, the issue still wasn't completely settled in the time of Shakespeare. As most of you probably know, he used both the 'S' ending and the 'ETH' ending in his various works.

By the way, it isn't entirely clear where the northern 'S' ending came from. It may have developed from an 'SK' verb ending that was common in Old Norse, but modern scholars are not entirely sure about that.

There was one other important feature of the Northern dialect which I've mentioned before, and that involved the pronunciation of the long 'A' sound. Back in Episode 96, I talked about how that sound changed in the south of England – from /ah/ to /aw/. During the Great Vowel Shift in the 1400s and 1500s, it shifted again to the /oh/ sound. So we have Old English ***stan*** (/stahn/),

Middle English ***ston*** /stawn/, and Modern English ***stone*** (/stone/). Well, as I noted in that episode, that sound change did not occur in the north of England and in Scotland. So this Northern dialect retained the original /ah/ sound of Old English.

So around the current point in our story, a speaker in the south would have said /stawn/, but a speaker in the north would have said /stahn/. This difference can be detected in the documents of this period because southern writers used the letter O for this new sound. So southern manuscripts spell these words with an O where northern manuscripts use the traditional letter A when spelling the same word. Again, the northern and southern versions of the Cursor Mundi reflect these differences.

Now all of the Northern dialect features I just mentioned were discussed in earlier episodes, but I wanted to put all of those together for you so you could get a sense of how this Northern dialect differed from the dialects of the south. These are not all of the differences, they're just some of the major ones, and they are prominent in the Cursor Mundi.

So let's turn to the actual language of that poem. I'm going to take you through the first few lines of the Prologue of the poem. The Prologue explains that people love to read romances and stories about Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, King Arthur and Charlemagne. But the poet says that he composed his work in honor the Virgin Mary. He also says that French rhymes are everywhere, but there is nothing for those people who only speak English. So he has composed his poem in English for those people who have no ability to speak French. Here are the first ten lines in Modern English:

Men yearn to hear poems
And (to) read romances in various manners or styles
Of Alexander the conqueror
Of Julius Caesar the emperor
Of the strong strife of Greece and Troy
Where many thousand lost their life
Of Brutus that warrior bold of hand
The first conqueror of England
King Arthur that was so great
Whom none in his time was like

Now here's the same passage in the Northern dialect of Middle English:

Man yhernes rimes forto here
And romans red on manere sere
Of Alisaundur þe conquerour
Of luly Cesar þe emparour
O Grece and Troy þe strang scrijf
þere many thosand lesis þer lijf
O Brut þat bern bald of hand
þe first conquerour of Ingland

Kyng Arthour þat was so rike
Quam non in hys tim was like

Now let's break that down a little bit. The very first line is: "Man yhernes rimes forto here." Literally, "Man yearns for rhymes for to hear." The verb is ***yhernes*** or 'yearns' – with that 'S' ending that was common in the north and which is also standard in Modern English. But the slightly later southern copy of the poem renders the word as ***ʒernen*** with an 'EN' ending that was common around London and the Midlands. So right out of the gate, we see the difference between the two versions. Also note that the northern poet uses the word ***rimes*** – or 'rhymes' – with that plural 'S' ending that was common in the north and which also became standard over time. So, much of this poem looks and sounds similar to Modern English. And as these elements mixed with other elements from the south, we can start to get an idea of how Modern English emerged from a mixture of these various dialects.

The second line of the poem is "And romans red on manere sere" – "And romances read in manner 'sere.' ***Sere*** was a Norse word that meant 'various.' So 'on manere sair' meant 'of various manners' or 'of various styles.' So people like to listen to rhymes and romances of various styles.

Now the southern version of the text used a different wording. Instead of 'manere sere,' the southern poet used the phrase "dyuerse manere" – 'diverse manner.' ***Diverse*** is a French word, and it was a brand new word in English at this point. So whereas the Northern poet used a Norse word, the southern scribe used a new French word. This shows how much Norse influence there was in the language of the north.

Let me make one other note about the second line of the poem – "And romans red on manere sere." The verb here is ***red*** (/raid/) – or ***read***. The northern poet renders the word phonetically as R-E-D. Remember that the letter E had the /ay/ sound at the time, so R-E-D was /raid/ with no inflectional ending. But the southern scribe who re-worked the poem rendered the word as R-E-D-E – /raid-eh/. So he added an E to the end. In an earlier episode, I discussed how the various inflectional endings of Old English had mostly collapsed into a single generic 'eh' ending by this point represented by letter E. Many Middle English documents are filled with words that end with a simple generic E – representing what had once been a variety of very specific endings. So the E wasn't really doing anything anymore, it was just a lingering remnant of a past era when endings were much more important. So it was probably inevitable that English speakers would eventually drop those generic E's at the end of all of those words since they no longer served any purpose. And that's exactly what had happened in the north of England by this point. Most manuscripts composed in the north drop many of the final E's. And even when the E is retained, most scholars think it was probably silent in the north by this point. So here we see the northern poet drop the E in the verb ***red*** (/raid/)– or ***read*** – whereas the southern poet retains the E in his spelling and probably pronounced it as well.

I should note that both writers spelled the word ***manner*** the same way – with an E at the end – M-A-N-E-R-E. But again, most scholars agree that the E was probably silent in the north. Of course, it was eventually dropped in both the north and the south, but sometimes that silent E was

retained as a marker to indicate that the preceding vowel was pronounced as a long vowel. And that was the origin of the modern 'silent E' at the end of many words in Modern English.

For purposes of this episode, the important thing to take from all of this is that E first fell silent in the north of England, and by the time of the Cursor Mundi, it was either being dropped altogether or it was retained in the spelling but not pronounced.

Now I've only analyzed the first two lines of a poem that is nearly 30,000 lines long. And in just those first two lines, we can see lots of important developments, and we can see lots of differences between the dialects of the north and the south.

Let me point out a few other specifically northern features in those first few lines. In line 6, we have "many thosand lesis þer lijf" – "many thousands lost their life." So here we have the Norse pronoun ***their*** instead of the Old English pronoun ***here***. In line 7, the legendary founder of Britain named Brutus is described as "bald of hand" which reads as "bald (B-A-L-D) of hand." So why did Brutus have 'bald' hands. Well, he didn't. This is actually the word ***bold***. He was 'bold of hand.' The Old English version of the word was ***bald***, and here we see the northern text retain that original form and that original long A sound. But remember, in the south of England, that sound experienced the changes I discussed earlier – from /ah/ to /aw/ to /oh/. And the southern version of the text reflects that change and renders the word with an O – spelled B-O-L-D-E. And again, the southern version adds that generic E at the end which is missing in the northern version.

And in the last two lines that I read earlier, the northern poet rhymes ***rich*** and ***like***. Now those words don't rhyme today, but they did rhyme in the poet's northern dialect. ***Rich*** was pronounced (/reek/) and ***like*** was pronounced (/leek/). Here are those two lines again:

Kyng Arthour þat was so rike (/reek/)
Quam non in hys tim was like (/leek/)

literally –

King Arthur that was so rich
Whom none in his time was like

First of all, the vowel sound has obviously evolved in both words. But originally, they had the traditional long I sound of Old and Middle English which was /ee/ – /reek/ and /leek/. But let's focus on the final 'K' sound. If you've listened to all of the episodes, you might remember that I talked about the word ***rich*** in one of the early episodes – specifically Episode 5 where I talked about the letter C. It originally meant 'powerful or great.' And that's how the word was used here. When the poet says that King Arthur was /reek/ or rich, he didn't necessarily mean that Arthur had a lot of money. He meant that Arthur was powerful and great. In the Middle Ages, powerful and great men tended to be associated with nobility, so they also tended to be wealthy. And over time, the English word came to be associated mainly with the wealth of a person.

In early Old English, the word was probably pronounced something like /ree-keh/. But as I noted earlier, that 'K' sound softened to a 'CH' sound in the south, and the word became /ree-cheh/ in Old English. And by the way, the word ***like*** worked the same way. It was pronounced more like /lee-cheh/ in Old English. But in the north of England, the Norse versions of those words were common. The Norse versions were /rikr/ and /likr/. And remember that the Northern dialect tended to retain the hard 'K' sound where southern English had the softer 'CH' sound. So here, the northern poet renders the words as /reek/ and /leek/, but the southern scribe changed both of those words to ***riche*** and ***liche***.

Now today, in Modern English, we have those words as ***rich*** and ***like***, so we kept the southern form of ***rich*** with the 'CH' sound at the end. And we adopted the northern version of ***like*** with the 'K' sound at the end. The fact that Modern English has retained ***rich*** from the south and ***like*** form the north shows how both of those regions contributed to Modern English. As people from around England converged in places like London, these dialects mixed together, and English speakers tended to settle on one form or the other over time.

This difference between the 'K' sound of the north and softer 'CH' sound of the south was one of the distinguishing features of these two dialects. And a few lines later in the Cursor Mundi, the northern poet uses the word ***ilkon*** which is barely recognizable to most Modern English speakers. But if we substitute a southern 'CH' for that northern 'K' sound, we go from ***ilkon*** to /eelch - on/ which is actually an early version of the phrase 'each one.' So ***ilkon*** is simply a northern version of 'each one' – ***ilk*** being the northern equivalent of southern ***each***. In just a few lines of this old northern poem, we have seen lots of features which distinguish the Northern dialect from the speech of southern England.

I want to conclude our look at the Cursor Mundi by looking at a passage from near the end of the Prologue. This passage is interesting because it explains why the poet chose to compose the poem in English instead of French. This passage reflects the re-emerging sense of pride in English. And it also suggests a certain resentment at the prominent role of French at the time.

Here's the passage. I'll rotate the Modern English translation and the original Middle English version:

After the Holy Church's state, this book has been translated into the English tongue to be read for the love of the English people, the English people of England, for the common people to understand. French rhymes are read and are common in each place. Most are written for Frenchmen. But what is there for him who can speak no French?

Efter haly kyrc state
Þis ilk bok es translate
Into Inglis tong to rede
For the loue of Inglis lede,
Inglish lede of Ingland,
For the commun at understand.

Frankis rimes here I redd,
Comunlik in ilk[a] sted;
Mast es it wroght for frankis man,
Quat is for him na Frankis can?

In the nation of England, English men have a common speech with which most may succeed. Most find it necessary to speak with it. But seldom by any chance, was the English tongue praised in France. If we give to each their own language, I do not think we do them any outrage. To the common English man I write. To he who understands what I say.

In Ingland the nacion,
Es Inglis man þar in commun;
Þe speche þat man wit mast may spede;
Mast þarwit to speke war nede.
Selden was for ani chance
Praised Inglis tong in France;
Give we ilkan þare langage,
Me think we do þam non outrage.
To laud and Inglish man I spell
Þat understandes þat I tell.
(Prologue, II, ll. 232-250)

This passage contains a lot of the features we've already examined. We find the Norse pronoun forms ***them*** and ***their***. We find the prominent northern 'K' sound in ***kyrc*** instead of southern ***church***. And once again, we see the use of northern ***ilk*** instead of southern ***each***. We also see the old /ah/ sound which became /aw/ and then /oh/ in the south. So the poem uses ***haly***, ***mast*** and ***na*** instead of southern ***holy***, ***most*** and ***no***.

But there's one other thing that stands out. The scribe routinely refers to himself as ***I*** – pronounced /ee/ at the time. This was a shortening of the Old English pronoun ***ic*** (/each/) – usually spelled I-C. This change was mostly complete in the Northern dialect by this point, so our modern first-person pronoun ***I*** was established in the north first. But in the South, ***ic*** was still common.

Now this is probably a good time to discuss some important developments concerning the letter I that were taking place in early Middle English. First of all, as I just noted, the single letter I was now its own word – the first person pronoun ***I***. And when it was used as a pronoun, it was becoming a common practice to capitalize it to make it stand out. Otherwise, a single lower-case 'I' would tend to get lost in the flowing script of this period. More on that in a moment.

The northern scribes were also starting to use the letter I in another way – to mark a long vowel sound. I have alluded to this before back in Episode 89. To indicate a long A sound, they would sometimes put an I after it giving us the AI spelling of words like ***rain***, ***raid***, and ***saint***. They also put it after an E giving us the EI spelling of words like ***weight*** and ***freight***. It was also added after a U producing a UI spelling that never really caught on in the south but was popular in the

north, and it still survives in Scotland. That's why the Scots word ***guid*** (/good/) is spelled G-U-I-D. And they even put an I after an I to indicate a long I sound. In fact, in one of the passages I read earlier, we had the word ***life***, but it was spelled L-I-I-F.

Now there was a problem with putting two 'I's together in the flowing handwritten text of the Middle Ages. If you did that, it looked like a U. It was much like modern cursive writing. If you write double 'I's in modern cursive, the two 'I's look like U – especially if there are no dots above the 'I's. So L-I-I-F looked like /luf/. This was a constant problem with the letter 'I' during this period. When it appeared before or after a U, it looked like a W. In a word like ***minimum***, all of the repeating up and down strokes made it almost impossible to determine where one letter ended and another began. So scribes look for ways to deal with this problem – to make the letter 'I' stand out.

As I just noted, they capitalized the 'I' when it was used by itself as a pronoun. Another technique conceived by European scribes was to put a dot above the 'I,' and that soon became standard.

The dot helped the 'I' to stand out above the line of text, but scribes also modified the 'I' to make it stick out below the line. They did that by giving the 'I' a little tail at the bottom to make it stand out. The tail usually curved to the left, and it became standard to do that with the second 'I' when two 'I's were used back-to-back. In fact, that's how the Cursor Mundi poet spelled his words. When he wrote L-I-I-F for ***life***, he gave the second I a little tail. Well, no one knew it at the time, but that little tail in the 'I' was the beginning of a brand new letter – our modern letter J.

There was no letter J at this time. There was just an 'I' that was sometimes written like a J to make it stand out. But English was borrowing a lot of words from French with a 'J' sound at the front. Words like ***judge*** and ***justice*** and ***jury*** and ***January*** and ***July***. You might remember that the J sound in those words had evolved out of what was originally an 'I' sound in early Latin. All of those words once began with an 'I' sound and were spelled with an 'I.'

But over the centuries, that sound had evolved from I to Y to J. I've talked about that before. You might remember that the name of the Roman Emperor Caesar went from /ee-oo-lius/ – to /yoo-lius/. And then in French, it became Iulius (/joo-lius/), but it was still spelled with an initial 'I.'

Well after the printing press was introduced a little later in our story, it became common to use the fancy version of the 'I' at the beginning of those words – to represent that /j/ sound. And once that fancy 'I' with the tail was assigned to that sound, it started to be viewed as a distinct letter. And that eventually produced our letter J. So J is really just a fancy 'I' which was assigned to a specific sound that evolved out of the 'I' sound in Latin.

Again, it took a few centuries to get from the fancy 'I' with a tail to the distinct letter J, but we can see the very beginning of that process in English in works like Cursor Mundi. When the scribe spelled ***life*** – L-I-I-F – and when he gave the second 'I' a tail to make it distinct, his intent

was presumably to indicate a long vowel sound and to make the second 'I' stand out, but he was actually employing a technique that ultimately produced our modern letter J.

I should also make it clear that this fancy 'I' was not limited to the Northern dialect of English, and it wasn't invented in the north of Britain. Latin scribes had invented the technique, and it was used in other parts of Britain, and for that matter in other parts of Europe. We see a similar use in the Swedish name Bjorn – B-J-O-R-N. And the name of the Icelandic singer Bjork – B-J-O-R-K. But in Britain, this fancy 'I' was especially common in the north where double 'I's were much more common and where there was a need to distinguish them in writing.

There was one other important development in the north of England that shaped the way we use the letter 'I' today. That development was the merger of the 'Y' sound with the 'I' sound. Now today, letters 'Y' and 'I' can represent the same vowel sounds, but they represented different sounds in Old English. The letter 'I' had the /ee/ sound as we've seen, and we still have that sound in some loanwords like ***pizza***. The letter Y had a slightly different sound. It was pronounced like an 'I' with lips rounded. So 'I' was pronounced /ee/, and 'Y' was pronounced was /ü/. This sound still exists in some European languages, but it has disappeared from standard English. As I noted, it disappeared in the Northern dialect region in early Middle English. There, the speakers just stopped rounding their lips, so /ü/ just became /ee/. Linguists say the Y became 'unrounded.' And when that happened, the 'Y' sound was identical to the 'I' sound. By the way, this same change happened in eastern England from London northward.

Now you may be saying, "So what?," but this was a big deal because it gave scribes a new way to solve the problem they had with writing the letter 'I.' As we saw, the letter 'I' often got lost in flowing handwriting style of the time. I mentioned that one solution was to put a dot above the 'I.' Another solution was to capitalize the 'I' when it was used by itself as a pronoun. And a third solution was to give it a little tail which eventually became our letter J. And now, in the north and east of England, scribes had a fourth solution. They could simply take out the 'I' and put a 'Y' in its place. A 'Y' was much more distinct, so it became common to substitute a 'Y' for an 'I.'

Words like ***my***, ***by***, ***fly***, ***baby***, ***lady*** and ***pretty*** all got their modern Y's at the end though this process – a process that began with the convergence of the 'Y' and 'I' sounds in the north and east of England.

And you might have noticed something interesting about the placement of the 'Y' in those words. The Y's are at the end. The 'Y' substitution was sometimes made in other parts of words, but it was especially common at the end of a word because scribes didn't like to end a word with an 'I.' So it became standard to replace the 'I' with a 'Y' at the end of a word – especially around London where modern standard English emerged.

Again, this spelling change happened when a word ended with an 'I,' but if the 'I' was not located at the end, it was more likely to be retained. That's why ***my*** got a 'Y' at the end, but ***mine*** retained its 'I.'

This also explains another English spelling rule. When we have a word that ends in 'Y' and we make it plural, we drop the 'Y' and add 'I-E-S.' So ***baby*** and ***lady*** – become ***babies*** and ***ladies*** – with an 'I-E-S.' That plural ending means that the 'I' is no longer at the end. The 'S' is now at the end, and remember that that plural S ending is a northern innovation. And since the 'I' sound is no longer at the end, we don't have to use the 'Y' anymore. So that plural ending means that we can revert back to the original letter 'I'. And that produces 'I-E-S.'

I should note that we do have a few words that end in 'I' in Modern English like ***ski***, and ***khaki***, and ***spaghetti***. But those are relatively recent loanwords that came in with non-traditional spellings, and those spellings were retained.

Again, the substitution of 'Y' for 'I' really became common a little later, but that substitution was dependent on the merger of the 'I' and 'Y' vowel sounds, and that merger took place in the north and east of England around the current point in our story. And we can see how a slight change in a vowel sound can have a dramatic impact on spelling conventions.

So with that, I'm going to conclude our look at the Northern dialect of Middle English. We've seen several unique features of this dialect – some of which have passed into standard English and some of which didn't. But to get a better sense of the contrast between the speech of the north and the speech of the south, we need to take closer look the southern dialect of Middle English. So next time, we'll shift our focus south and look at an example of the Southern dialect. Once again, we'll see some features that became standard and some that remained regional. We'll also examine some of the modern differences between accents of the south and those of the north. There are a few pronunciations that clearly distinguish one group from the other, but most of those differences are the product of changes that took place in the south. So we'll look at those developments as well.

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