THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 121: ENGLISH ASCENT

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 121: English Ascent. In this episode, we're going to explore the aftermath of the Black Death in England. During this period, the massive death toll led to some important social changes which impacted the history of English. Severe labor shortages caused an economic upheaval in the countryside, and those labor shortages actually turned the feudal system on its head. Farm labor was suddenly in high demand, and the peasants were able to command generous wages. Along the way, power shifted from the lords to the peasants. And a new middle class emerged in the countryside to join the urban middle class in the towns and cities. As we'll see, these developments gave the English language a boost. And it culminated with a proclamation making English the official language of England. So this time, we'll explore the ascendency of English and the ascendency of the English-speaking classes.

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

Now this time, I want to look at the period immediately following the Black Death in England. In the decade or so that followed the plague, the old social and economic order started to break down. That old system was the feudal system imposed by Normans about three centuries earlier. That system is usually analyzed in terms of its economic and legal and social structure. But as we know, there was also a linguistic aspect to that system, specifically the forced introduction of Norman French as the official language of the royal court and the nobility. So the English government conducted its business and preserved its records in French and Latin – not English. And that was because the nobles considered French to be a superior language to English. But that entire system started to break down after the Black Death, and the decline of that system also led to the decline of French and the rise of English.

The effects of the Black Death reached every corner of England – and every town and city. But some of the most important changes were taking place in the countryside where the vast majority of the population lived. Out in the country, the status of the peasants was changing. Despite the hardships wrought by the plague, many of the surviving peasants actually experienced an overall improvement in their economic situation. The laboring classes were starting to make a little money and acquire some wealth. And much of that improvement came at the expense of the landed nobility.

Immediately prior to the Black Death, about 90% of the wealth of England lay in land. About 70% of that land was held by the nobility and the church. Most of the rest was held by a wealthy middle class that was becoming known as the ***gentry***, which was a brand-new loanword from French in the mid-1300s. Generally speaking, the gentry were wealthy land holders, but they weren't technically nobles. They didn't have titles like duke or earl or baron. They were actually commoners, and they represented the upper middle class of rural England.

Below the nobility and the gentry were the peasants, which included the vast majority of the population in the countryside. They were mostly people from Anglo-Saxon stock. They represented the traditional English-speaking class, and most of them held small family plots in exchange for steep rents and labor services that had to be provided to the local lord. So they were tied to that small plot of land – and not just as practical matter. In most cases, they were legally bound to that land, unable to leave without the consent of the local lord.

I explained the role of peasants in the feudal system way back in Episode 70. In that episode, I explained how the Norman Conquest led to the introduction of the feudal system. Under that system, the king owned all the land in the country, and everyone else held land from him. The kings gave most of the land to a small group of barons who held the land as vassals of the kings. They in turn distributed large portions of their land to their vassals. And those vassals distributed their holdings to the people beneath them. Along the way, each holder agreed to pay rents and fees and provide certain services to the person above him or her. This created long chains of lord-vassal relationships.

At the very top was the king. And often, at the very bottom was a peasant who held a small piece of land consisting of a few acres. And as I noted back in episode 70, there were two kinds of peasants – free peasants and unfree peasants. By far, most peasants were unfree.

There were several basic differences between free and unfree peasants. Unfree peasants were usually forced to work for their lord. They provided labor with little or no payment. When payment was made, it often in grains or commodities rather than money. Some did earn some money through side work or the sale of excess crops, but that money usually went to lord to pay the rents and fees associated with small land holding. So those unfree peasants had a heavy burden. And they had no right to leave or transfer their property without the lord's consent. If they had a dispute with the lord or someone else, the dispute was heard in the local manor court which was often controlled by the lord. So the life of an unfree peasant often resembled that of a slave. Their entire existence was largely controlled by the lord from whom they held their property.

By contrast, free peasants were in a much better position. They usually paid rents and fees to their lord, but they didn't have to provide labor services – at least not to the extent of the unfree peasants. So free peasants were more like modern tenants in that their relationship to the landlord was mostly financial. Free peasants also had more freedom to sell and transfer their lands to someone else. And if there was a dispute, they could have their case heard in the local shire court or royal court, which wasn't controlled by the lord. So it was much better to be recognized as a free peasant even though they were relatively few in number.

Now this is all very neat and simple in theory, but the reality was anything but neat and simple. It wasn't always clear if a peasant's holdings were classified as free or unfree. Over time, some free peasants purchased or acquired lands that technically unfree. And there were even cases where unfree peasants acquired lands that were classified as free.

Over time, lands were divided among vassals without little or no documentation. Heirs inherited and further subdivided holdings. Some died or defaulted, and it wasn't always clear if the property rights passed on to an heir or reverted back to the lord. A lord might distribute lands to a vassal with one set of conditions, and that vassal would turn around and distribute those lands to someone else with a different set of conditions. After a couple of centuries of Norman rule, these landholdings were an absolute mess. There were so many links in these long chains of property holdings that barons and prominent lords had effectively lost control of much of their estates. They didn't really know the tenants on the ground who held their land, and they didn't know the conditions under which that land was being held. That meant they had a tough time collecting fees and rents and services from their vassals because these relationships had become so messy and difficult to enforce. The courts were backlogged with cases trying to resolve these disputes and trying to define exactly who held what land subject to what conditions.

If you were a peasant trying to enforce your rights in those local courts against another peasant or against a lord, you were at a severe disadvantage. The court proceedings were conducted in French, and records were kept in Latin. Since most peasants only spoke English, they found it difficult to assert their rights in court. Most needed to hire a lawyer represent them, and many could not afford to do that. That made it especially difficult for a peasant to take on a local lord in court. So even when a peasant had property rights in theory, it wasn't always possible to enforce those rights, and the French language was one of the barriers that got in the way.

About a half century earlier, Edward I had tried to get a handle on this messy system. He was the king known as Longshanks, and back in Episode 111, I discussed how he implemented a lot of legal reforms during in his reign. In fact, the word ***statute*** dates from that period. And one of the many statutes passed during that time was a law that was intended to clarify the way land was to be held and transferred.

The statute was adopted in the year 1290, and it was written in Latin. It is commonly known today by the first two Latin words in the statute – Quia Emptores. Now you may think this was some obscure Medieval law, but if you've ever had the fortune – or misfortune – of attending law school, that term Quia Emptores will probably ring a few bells because it is one of the statutes that laid the foundation of modern property law throughout much of the English-speaking world.

The law was basically a compromise between the major lords who couldn't collect their rents and labor services, and smaller tenants who held land with vague and uncertain rights. This new law gave free peasants the right to sell and transfer their property as they pleased. Many of them already claimed that right, but this law formalized it. In exchange for that right, the law said that when a seller sold property, the buyer took the seller's place in the chain of ownership. So unlike in the past, when the buyer became a vassal of the seller, thereby creating a new link in the chain of ownership, this new law said that there were to be no more new links in the chain. If I sold land to you, I was no longer your lord. You just took my place in the chain, and my lord became your lord.

The idea behind this law is that those long chains of lord-vassal relationships had become messy and unwieldy. There were too many links. Too many vassals with undefined and uncertain rights. Those chains needed to be scaled back so that everyone understood what their rights were and what their obligations were. So this law – Quia Emptores – did that by prohibiting any new links to be added to those existing chains. At the bottom of those chains, the tenants were free to sell their land as they saw fit. So a piece of property could exchange hands over and over again without creating any new lord-vassal relationships. When you bought property, you jumped into the chain, and when you sold property, you jumped out. So now you had something more akin to actual ownership. Something you could buy and sell. This made land more of a commodity. This law ultimately created a market for the purchase and sale of land. And that meant that peasants actually had the ability to build up an estate over time if they worked hard enough and were savvy in their dealings. This law was one of the first major steps in the erosion of the traditional feudal system.

However, one of the limitations of this law is that it technically applied to the free peasants, but not the unfree peasants, and most peasants were unfree. Now many lords allowed their unfree peasants to buy and sell small holdings, but ultimately the lords could object if they wanted to, and this law didn't change that. So even though the law created a new market for land, it was somewhat limited by all the property held by unfree peasants. But in the mid-1300s, those limitations were largely wiped away by the Black Death. The plague was the great equalizer, and the distinction between free and unfree peasants started to disappear.

As we saw last time, about a third of the population died during the initial outbreak of the plague. Many small villages ceased to exist. On some manors, most of the peasants died. In some cases, they all died. And that created a big problem for the manor lords.

They absolutely depended on the labor of the peasants to tend the crops and care for the livestock. But now, there weren't enough peasants to maintain many of those manors. Lords became desperate to retain the peasants who survived, and they had to look for new peasants to fill the vacancies left by the plague. That meant that power started to shift from the lords to the peasants who were now able to dictate their own terms to the lords. Since there was such a great demand for labor, a peasant could leave the manor and go work somewhere else for money. And even though the unfree peasants weren't supposed to do that, there wasn't much the manor lord could do to stop it.

For many lords, one solution to the problem was to release the unfree peasants from their labor obligations altogether. In other words, they could convert unfree peasants into free peasants. Instead of forced labor, the peasants would be paid for their work, and that tended to keep them on the farm. The lords also offered to hire runaway peasants from other manors who were looking to improve their situation. All of this meant that many peasants shifted from being unfree serfs tied to the land to laborers who were paid for their work. It also meant peasants could demand more and more money as the manors were forced to bid against each other for workers. So peasant wages shot up during this period. That was great for peasants, but it became a heavy burden for manor lords who had to spend a lot of money on labor just to keep the manor operating.

The lords also faced another problem. The price of the food and other crops produced on the manors started to go down. After the plague, so many people had died that there simply wasn't much demand for all of that food. Lords had a tough time selling their commodities, so the prices went down. At the same time they were having to pay more and more for labor, they were receiving less and less for their products. So they were being squeezed from both sides. Faced with this dilemma, they were lucky to break even.

This led many lords to look at other alternatives. For many, it was better to let the peasants assume the risk. So many lords started to sell or lease their lands to peasants who now had some extra spending money. This allowed those peasants to become independent farmers in their own right, and it hastened the demise of the old manor system. Now I'm painting with broad strokes here, but the bottom line is that the old era of serfs and unfree peasants gave way to a more modern era of small independent farmers. It didn't happen overnight, but the process was set in motion by the Black Death.

Many of those peasants took advantage of these opportunities in the late 1300s, but some were more successful than others. Through hard work and financial savvy, some peasants acquired sizeable estates. These were the peasants who became known as ***yeomen***.

Yeomen were free peasants who worked their way up the social and economic ladder by purchasing and leasing lands from other peasants or from manor lords. They were part of a new rural middle class, and their holdings started to grow by leaps and bounds. In many respects, the growth of the yeoman class in the countryside mirrored the growth of the craftsmen and laborers in the towns which we've explored in prior episodes. What all those people had in common is that they were common laborers. They weren't nobles or gentry. They didn't live off of their wealth or the work of others. They worked for themselves, and they accumulated a bit of personal wealth along the way. They had a degree of freedom that the poorest peasants didn't have. They also came from the traditional English-speaking classes. And they took advantage of the opportunities afforded by the collapse of the old economic system that had held them back for three centuries.

Again, this growing class of small independent farmers were called ***yeomen***. That word appeared for the first time in English documents around this same period. It is first recorded in a document from the year 1345 about three years before the Black Death, but it was originally used to refer a servant in a noble household. By the end of the century, it had come to refer to these rural peasants who had accumulated a significant estate through hard work. And that helps to explain Modern English terms like "yeoman's service" and "yeoman's work." If you do "yeoman's work" to achieve some goal, it means that you put in hard and valuable labor. And it refers back to these hard-working peasants who accumulated a degree of wealth and power in the aftermath of the Black Death.

I should note that the ultimate origin of the word ***yeoman*** is uncertain. The most popular theory is that it is derived from an early rendering of the phrase 'young man.' And there is a certain logic to that theory because many of those early yeomen were in fact 'young men.' They were the

ones who were more likely to be healthy and energetic enough to do the work required to become a yeoman. But again, the ultimate origin of the word is obscure

I noted that many yeomen acquired their estates through hard work and financial savvy, but for others, it was a much easier process. Before the Black Death, there tended to be lots of surviving children, so when a parent died, the property tended to be divided among them in some manner. But now, many families lacked heirs to inherit the property and tend to the farm. This meant that more distant relatives could now claim the property when someone died. So an eager peasant who wanted to add more land to his holdings might try to claim the lands of deceased relatives like siblings, and aunts and uncles, and even in-laws. So rather than estates being divided over time, now they were sometimes aggregated and joined together due to a general lack of heirs. This was another way for a yeoman to accumulate a sizeable estate.

According to some estimates, the average peasant holding doubled in size after the plague – from around 12 acres beforehand to around 24 acres afterwards. [Source: *"Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages," Frances and Joseph Gies*]. This was partly due to the combination or aggregation of land. In fact, words like ***aggregate*** and ***congregate*** appeared in English documents for the first time over the next few decades. They were both borrowed directly from Latin, and they both have a fundamental connection to peasants. They both share the same Latin root ***grex***, which meant a flock or herd. The original root sense of ***aggregate*** or ***congregate*** in Latin was to bring together a flock of sheep or other animals. ***Segregate*** has the same root, and it originally referred to the process of separating or dividing a flock.

This Latin root was derived from an older Indo-European root that meant 'to gather.' It also passed into Greek where it produced the word ***agora***, meaning a group or collection. ***Agoraphobia*** has that same root, and you may know that it refers to a phobia or fear of crowds. Old English also had that root. You might remember that under Grimm's Law, the Indo-European 'g' sound became a 'k' sound in the Germanic languages. And that produced the Old English word ***cram***, meaning to force together. So ***cram***, ***aggregate*** and ***congregate*** are all cognate having evolved from the same Indo-European root word. And in the same way that Roman peasants ***aggregated*** or ***congregated*** their sheep, English peasants in the later half of the 1300s ***aggregated*** or ***congregated*** land holdings.

In fact, this situation contributed to the creation of another Modern English word – the word ***pedigree***. As I noted earlier, claims involving rights to lands clogged the English courts in the 1300s. Many heirs claimed property based on inherited rights from a distant relative. This was true for nobles and well as peasants. Records were not always maintained very well in manor courts, so some scholars offered their services as genealogists to help trace a person's ancestry which might help to prove a right of inheritance.

As they identified relatives, they would usually put together diagrams which were basically family trees. If an ancestor had three children, they would write down the ancestor's name and draw a vertical line beneath the name. They would then split the line into three separate lines to connect to the names of the three children below. These lines that connected a parent to children resembled the tracks left by birds when they walked in mud or snow. So they became known as

‘crane’s feet,’ or in the French language used by the courts, ‘pied de grue’ – literally ‘foot of a crane.’ This French term is found in documents composed in England in the mid-1300s. But by the early 1400s, it had been Anglicized from ‘pied de grue’ to ***pedigree***. Again, the word originally referred to these markings that showed lines of descent on a family tree or diagram. Over time, it came to refer to the entire diagram, and later it became a general term for a person’s ancestry or lineage.

So if a peasant could establish his pedigree, he might be able to enforce his claims to a disputed piece of property, thereby increasing his estate and wealth. But as I noted earlier, any legal proceeding to enforce those claims was bound to be conducted in French, which was a language that most peasants couldn’t speak.

Upwardly mobile peasants didn’t just face obstacles in the courts. They also faced obstacles in Parliament. French was also the official language of Parliament, but the peasants’ problem with Parliament wasn’t so much the language that was used as much as the people who sat in Parliament and made the laws. In prior episodes, we’ve seen that Parliament now regularly included commoners as well as nobles. And since the 1330s, the commoners had been meeting separately from the nobles. That was the beginning of the separate House of Commons. But the Commons didn’t really represent the peasant class. They came from the gentry and the knightly class. And together with the nobles, they were the ones having to pay the peasants those steep wages for work that used to be done for little or no payment at all.

So in the final year of the Black Death – 1351 – Parliament adopted a new law called the Statute of Laborers. It said that people could only demand wages at the rates that existed four years earlier prior to the Black Death. The law didn’t just attempt to ‘freeze’ the wage rates, it actually sought to roll them back to the period before the plague.

It was clearly designed to protect the upper classes, but it didn’t work. At the end of the day, if you were a landholder and desperately needed a peasant’s labor, it was easier to just pay him what he wanted. You could always refuse to hire him and turn him over to the authorities, but that didn’t help you plow the fields or harvest the crops. So peasant wages remained high even with this new law in place. The law is important though because it shows that the gentry were trying to use their political power to maintain the status quo. The Statute of Laborers was a response to the economic threat posed by rising working class as they started to acquire wealth and power in this new era. This conflict ultimately led to a major revolt by the peasants in the 1380s, but we’ll deal with that in a future episode.

I should also mention that this controversial law didn’t just apply to rural peasants. It also applied to the wages demanded by carpenters, masons, tailors, blacksmiths, cobblers, and most other professions as well. It also tried to regulate the prices charged by butchers, brewers, bakers, and sellers of other foodstuffs. So it impacted workers in the towns and cities as well. And this illustrates the fact that the power of these lower classes continued to grow in all parts of the country.

Since unfree peasants were now in a position where they could leave the manor and sell their labor on the open market, many of them moved to towns and cities to find work there. And that meant that towns and cities continued to grow, even though the overall population had decreased during the Black Death. So when we consider the rise of the working classes, we have to keep in mind that it was happening in the countryside and in the towns and cities. Again, these were people who spoke English and had little interest in the use or promotion of French. And they may have even seen French as a barrier, especially in the schools and courts where French was spoken. As I noted last time, English replaced French in the schools during this period, and that was about to happen in the courts and Parliament as well.

The first sign of this change occurred in London in the year 1356 – about five years after the Black Death had subsided. In that year, London officials ordered that all legal proceedings in the local sheriff's court be conducted in English instead of French. Though this change was limited to London and Middlesex, it was a crack in the dam, and it was a sign of things to come. It also reflected the increasing power of the laborers and craftsmen in London. The language of the common people was starting to be accepted in official circles, and French was being pushed to the margins.

That change in London occurred in the same year that the next major battle of the Hundred Year's War took place. The war had basically stopped during the Black Death, and in the five years since then, it had been limited to a few skirmishes. But in 1356, the English embarked on two major campaigns in France. One was led by the English king, Edward III. He campaigned in northern France for a few weeks before returning home to deal with Scottish raids in the north of England.

Meanwhile, his son, Prince Edward, led a campaign out of Bordeaux in the south of France. You might remember from a prior episode that Prince Edward was known as the Black Price because of his black armor. And in the late summer of 1356, the Black Prince headed out of Bordeaux into the central part of France on a raiding expedition – looting and plundering along the way. But the French king got word of the expedition, and he decided to confront the English forces.

The prior French king Philip had died six years before, and he had been succeeded by his son named John – known to history as John the Good. And it was John who decided to surprise the Black Prince. As the English forces made their way back to Gascony, John cut them off near the town of Poitiers.

The Black Prince wasn't prepared for a full-scale battle against a large French army, so he tried to negotiate his way out of the predicament, but John refused the offer and launched his attack. Despite having more troops, the French still hadn't figured out how to deal with the English longbows, and the Battle of Poitiers ended up being a repeat of the Battle of Crecy a decade earlier. The English forces defeated the French cavalry and won their second major victory of the war. More importantly for the English, they actually captured King John in the fighting. The French king and his son were taken prisoner and brought back to England the next spring. The Battle of Poitiers secured the reputation of the Black Prince as one of the great warriors of the

Middle Ages. His forces not only defeated a much larger French army, but he also captured the opposing king and took him prisoner.

Now to be fair, this was the era of chivalry, so King John's detention was pretty cushy. He was placed under house arrest in an English palace. The English king Edward III often visited John where they enjoyed large feasts and entertainment. Edward even brought John to Windsor so they could go hunting together. So it wasn't like John was thrown in Tower of London, but he was still a captive in the possession of his arch-rival.

By the way, John wasn't the only foreign king to be held captive in England. The Scots king David II had been taken prisoner during those Scottish raids in northern England the same year. The English now had possession of the allied kings of Scotland and France – the two bitter rivals of the English. This led to a spike in English nationalism and further challenged the notion of French superiority. It also challenged the idea that the language of France was somehow superior to the language of England. Nevertheless, Parliament and most of the courts continued to conduct their business in French – for now.

In the same year that the French king arrived in England as a prisoner, we also get another piece of evidence to show that the children of commoners had opportunities to move up in society and improve their standing. Under the right circumstances, they could even secure employment in a royal household. In that same year – 1357 – the young son of a London wine merchant was able to find employment in the household of the king's son and daughter-in-law. The second son of Edward III was named Lionel, and he was married to woman named Elizabeth de Burgh. They maintained their own household, and in the spring of 1357, records show that Elizabeth ordered a special suit of clothes for one of their young pages. The surviving ledgers show the purchase, as well as the name of the page who received the clothing. His name was Geoffrey Chaucer. And this is the first reference we have to the man who would become the most well-known poet of Middle English. He was a teenager at the time, and it isn't clear how the son of a wine merchant found his way into that position. Presumably, his father had some personal business connections. But whatever the circumstances, Chaucer took advantage of the new opportunities available to the rising middle class of England.

Two years later, Lionel joined his father and his brothers for another military campaign in France, and Chaucer is recorded as a soldier in Lionel's retinue during that campaign. Edward III had launched what he thought would be the final campaign to secure the French crown for himself. Up to this point, everything had gone his way, so it was probably a reasonable expectation at the time.

The English forces crossed the Channel and gathered at the port of Calais which had been captured by the English over a decade earlier. Edward had amassed one of the largest English armies ever assembled for a foreign invasion. Every available young man between the ages of 20 and 23 had been drafted. Once in northern France, the English army was divided into three divisions. One of the divisions was led by Edward's son – the Black Prince. He was accompanied by his younger brother Lionel, who included among his soldiers one Geoffrey Chaucer. The Black Prince was also accompanied by his two other younger brothers, John of

Gaunt and Edmund of Langley. And I mention them here because John of Gaunt later became the Duke of Lancaster and Edmund became the Duke of York. And it is these two young brothers that ultimately gave us the two distinct houses of Lancaster and York whose descendants would battle for the English crown during the Wars of the Roses. But that's a story for later. For now, those two patriarchs were fighting alongside their older brothers in France.

Edward III intended this invasion to be the final campaign of the war, but it was hampered by several problems. First, the campaign began in November which was very late in the year for a military campaign in northern Europe. Bad weather was a constant problem. In fact, the weather was unusually bad. It rained all the time, and there was constant flooding which hampered troop movements. On top of that, the French had anticipated the invasion, so they had stocked up for a long siege. Whenever an English army approached, they would quickly withdraw behind the city walls and force the English to lay siege in the cold and wet weather. On top of that, the French countryside had been devastated by the Black Plague and the English raids. Many farms lay empty with no crops or livestock. During a long siege, the English army would send out troops to the surrounding countryside to gather provisions, but there were very few provisions to be found or taken. So the English forces simply couldn't manage a long siege anywhere.

At some point during this period – it isn't entirely clear when or where – several English soldiers were captured and taken prisoner by the French. The circumstances aren't really known, but the reason I'm mentioning that fact is because one of the prisoners taken was Geoffrey Chaucer. This is the second time we find his name in the surviving records because ledgers from Edward's court show that the king paid Chaucer's ransom a few weeks later, and he was released back into English custody. The surviving ledger indicates that the ransom paid was 16 pounds.

As I noted, it isn't clear how or why Chaucer was taking captive. It is possible that he was captured while looking for food and supplies in the countryside. It was also common during this period for English scouts to try to lure the French soldiers out from behind their walls. Sometimes they got too close and were captured. So that's another possibility, but no one knows for sure. All that is known is that Chaucer was later released upon that payment of 16 pounds. The records also list him as a 'valettus, ' which is a Latin term that basically meant a 'yeoman' in English. I mentioned earlier that the word ***yeomen*** originally meant a servant in the royal household and later came to refer to a small farmer who owned his own farmland. And the typical ransom payment for a royal servant was 16 pounds – the amount paid for Chaucer's release.

We also know that Chaucer had been a page in the household of the king's son Lionel, so all of that suggests that Chaucer was considered a royal servant at this time.

A few years later, when Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales, he wrote about the hardships of war, and we can't help but assume that his experiences in captivity shaped his view. He later wrote, "There is ful many a man that crieth 'Werre! Werre!' that wot ful litel what werre amounteth." In Modern English, it reads, "There are many men that eagerly cry out for 'War! War!, but know very little of what war amounts to."

The hardships of war weren't just limited to Chaucer. As the months passed and the French campaign continued, King Edward couldn't manage to secure a victory. The French remained barricaded behind their walls, while Edward's army suffered though rain and snow and dwindling provisions.

Edward eventually brought his three divisions together, and in early spring, he laid siege to Paris. But once again, the citizens retreated behind the city walls, and Edward couldn't manage to take the city. After a couple of weeks, Edward withdrew and headed westward toward Brittany where he had strong allies and where he could re-fortify his army. But shortly after leaving Paris, his forces were struck by a freak thunderstorm. The storm battered the troops with hail and lighting. It was reported that many men died during the storm – some while sitting in their saddles on top of their horses. This storm occurred on the day after Easter, Monday, April 14th of the year 1360. English chroniclers started to refer to this event as "Black Monday." And this is widely believed to be the origin of the phrase "Black Monday" in English.

A chronicle composed in English in the early 1400s known as the Chronicle of London included the following entry for the year 1360. In Modern English, it reads:

> "In this same year, the 14th day of April and morning after Easter Day, King Edward with his host lay before the City of Paris; which was a foul dark day of mist and of hail, and so bitter cold, that sitting on horseback men died. Wherefore, unto this day, it is called Black Monday, and will be so-called for a long time hereafter."

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

> "In this same yere, the xiiij day off Aprill and the morwe after Ester Day, Kyng Edward with his Oost lay byfore the Citee off Parys; the which was a ffoule Derke day off myste, and off haylle, and so bytter colde, that syttyng on horse bak men dyed. Wherfore, vnto this day yt ys called blak Monday, and wolle be longe tyme here affter."

So the day after Easter become known as "Black Monday." The implication was that it was a day of bad luck. In the 1700s, school children started to associate the term with the day after the Easter holiday when children returned to school. So it came to refer to the first school day or work day after a vacation. It thereby acquired an additional negative sense as the day when the fun was over and you had to go back to work. But ultimately, the term appears to have its origin in this devastating storm that battered Edward's army in the French countryside in the year 1360.

Edward took this storm as a sign of God's wrath, that the war needed to be brought to an end, so he began peace talks with the French diplomats. Negotiations took place in the small town of Bretigny west of Paris. A settlement was soon reached. It was agreed that the French king John would be released from house arrest in England so he could return to France. In exchange, France agreed to pay a ransom of 3,000,000 gold crowns which was the equivalent of 500,000 English pounds. It was a ridiculous sum of money at the time, and it was never fully paid. The settlement also stipulated that the English king would retain control of Calais and the entire region of Aquitaine – not merely as a vassal of the French king – but as outright sovereign.

France was to be cut apart, with those regions now becoming independent regions under the control of the English king. In exchange for those concessions, Edward agreed to give up his claim to the French throne.

This treaty became known as the Treaty of Bretigny. It took a few months to work out all the details and to prepare the final version of the treaty. And once again, Geoffrey Chaucer was called into service. The surviving expense account of Edward's son Lionel shows that Chaucer was now working as a diplomat. Chaucer was paid nine shillings to travel to Calais and then to England carrying papers with specific questions that had come up during the negotiations. He then returned to France to deliver the answers. In a few short years, Chaucer had risen from the son on a London wine merchant, to a page in the household of the king's son, to royal servant, and now to an English diplomat. In this respect, he epitomized the rise of the English laboring class during this period.

With the terms of the treaty finalized, the French king John was released from English custody, and he returned to France. When John arrived back in France, he set about trying to raise that massive payment of 3,000,000 gold crowns. He soon decided to strike a new gold coin which had the same value as the existing livre, but it had a brand new design which featured John on horseback. It's Latin inscription read, "Johannes Dei gracia Francorum Rex" – literally "John, by the Grace of God, King of the Franks." But rather than using that long formal name, people in France just called it 'frank with a horse' – 'franc à cheval.' And from there, it was shortened to just ***franc***. For the next four centuries, the term ***franc*** and ***livre*** were both used in France. They were basically interchangeable, sort of like ***dollar*** and ***buck*** in the US, or ***pound*** and ***quid*** in the UK. In the late 1700s, the ***franc*** became the official name of the French currency, and it remained so until the introduction of the Euro in the early 2000s. So the old French ***franc*** has its ultimate origin with King John's attempt to raise the money needed to pay off the English for his release from house arrest in the mid-1300s.

As I noted earlier, the full amount was never paid. And even though Edward agreed to renounce his claims to the French throne, there was never any formal renunciation ceremony. So even though the Treaty of Bretigny looked like it might bring an end to the ongoing war with France, it didn't. The war resumed less than a decade later. Nevertheless, this treaty marked the height of English dominance in the war.

At this point, England looked like it was on the road to recovery after the Black Death. It had been a decade since the earlier plague passed, and a growing middle class was prospering throughout the country, but the next year brought a rude awakening. The plague returned for a second time, and once again, many people died. The death toll was not as great as the earlier outbreak, but for some reason, it was particularly bad for children. It appears that they lacked any immunity or tolerance for the disease since they were born after the Black Death. So many children died in this second outbreak that it became known as the 'Children's Plague' or the 'Pestilence of the Children.' All totaled, it appears that this second outbreak killed about 15% of the remaining population of England. [Source: *Time Travelers Guide to Medieval England, Ian Mortimer*.] This second outbreak also confirmed the fears of many people – that the plague was likely to be a recurring threat – that even when it subsided, it was likely to return to some point.

The second plague also had an indirect impact on our story because it permitted King Edward's third son to emerge as one of the most powerful figures in England. That third son was John of Gaunt, and as I noted in an earlier episode, he was one of Geoffrey Chaucer's most important patrons. He was also a strong advocate of the English language, and his power base was really secured during this second outbreak of the plague in 1361.

John of Gaunt had married a daughter of the Duke of Lancaster named Henry of Grosmont. Now this particular noble, the Duke of Lancaster, was the most powerful and important noble in England outside of King Edward and the Black Prince. The Duke's power base was in the north of England, but he did not have any sons. Her heirs were his two daughters. One of those daughters was named Blanche, and John of Gaunt had married her a couple of years earlier. But when this second plague arrived in England, it killed the Duke of Lancaster and his other daughter. So that left Blanche as the sole heir. So she and John inherited the late Duke's estate and all the wealth and power associated with that title. The next year, John's father King Edward formally designated John as the new Duke of Lancaster. And again, that was the beginning of the House of Lancaster which later vied for the English crown during the Wars of the Roses in the next century.

John received the title of Duke of Lancaster as part of a jubilee celebrating his father's 50th birthday. In 1362, Edward III turned 50, which was considered an advanced age at the time, especially given the Black Death and the second plague the prior year. By this point, Edward's reign was widely seen as a great success – both in England and abroad. He had taken on the kingdom of France, the most powerful kingdom in western Europe. And he had won several major victories in France. Even though he hadn't won the war, he had effectively carved up France and secured part of that kingdom for himself. Edward was wealthy and admired far and wide. He had a good relationship with Parliament. And he had several competent sons, so there was no succession crisis – at least not at this point. So Edward decided to commemorate his birthday with large public celebrations, and the celebrations culminated on November 13 with a grand meeting of Parliament. The Parliament was dominated by a large group of commoners, including knights, town leaders, rural landholders, and other prominent citizens.

This was the Parliament where John of Gaunt was recognized as the Duke of Lancaster. Edward's son Lionel was given the title of Duke of Clarence. Numerous petitions were considered, and citizen complaints were addressed. But there was something very unusual about that Parliament held in November of 1362. As was customary, the Parliament was opened with an address from the king's chancellor, but for the first time, the speech was given in English – not French. That was a remarkable change because it showed that the ascent of English had reached the highest levels of the government. There is no record of the actual comments delivered on that day, but from this point on, English was used in Parliament, thereby giving it an official status within the English government.

And the English language wasn't just making inroads in Parliament. It was also making inroads in the courts. One of the items on Parliament's agenda that year was to make English the official language of the courts. As I noted earlier in this episode, the courts were clogged with legal disputes, especially disputes over the rights to land and inheritances. This was being accelerated

by the death toll stemming from the Black Death and the recurrence of the plague in the prior year. Most of those litigants only spoke English, but the legal proceedings were conducted in French. So this required the average person to have a lawyer who spoke French. And it's very likely that people found it difficult to find a lawyer to handle their case. In the last episode, we saw that so many teachers died during the Black Death that younger less-educated teachers had to be brought in to fill the void. And since many of them couldn't speak French, the schools largely abandoned French in favor of English. Well, the courts apparently faced a similar problem. It is very possible that many experienced lawyers died in the two plagues, and the younger lawyers who replaced them didn't speak French – or didn't speak it very well. So for similar reasons, it made sense to switch from French to English in the courtrooms.

The law that formally adopted English as the language of the courts was called the Pleading in English Act of 1362, but it is more commonly known as the Statute of Pleading. It specifically said that all pleadings and oral arguments in court should be made in English. And it is important to remember that Parliament itself was a court – essentially the Supreme Court of the day. So this law also required that Parliament use English as well. Here is an abridged version of the statute in Modern English:

> "Because it is often shown to the king . . . that great mischief has occurred throughout the realm because the laws . . . of this realm are not commonly known and understood since they are pleaded and judged in the French language, which is mostly unknown in this realm; so that the people who plead in the king's court, and in the courts of others, have no knowledge nor understanding of what is said for them or against them by their lawyers and other pleaders; it is therefore reasonable that the laws and customs should be learned and known and better understood in the language which is used in this realm, so that the people of this realm may better govern themselves without offending the law, and may better keep and defend their inheritances and possessions . . ."

The statute continues:

> ". . .the king, desiring the good governance and tranquillity of his people, and to discourage the harms and mischiefs described above, has ordained and established . . . that all pleas which shall be pleaded in his courts, before any of his justices, or in his other places, or before any of his other ministers, or in the courts and places of any other lords within the realm, shall be pleaded, defended, answered, debated, and judged in the English language, and that they be entered and enrolled in Latin."

Now notice that last part. Despite the fact that English was to be spoken in the courts, when it came time to write down the final verdict or judgment on the docket, it was to be written down and preserved in Latin. And the surviving court rolls are actually a mixture of English, Latin and French for the next century or so. In fact, this statute – which required the use of English – was itself composed in French. So here we have a bunch of English-speaking Parliamentarians who sometimes spoke French in Parliament, enacting a law in French, which required English to be spoken in the courts, but also required that the proceedings be written down and preserved in Latin. And that pretty much sums up the linguistic situation in England in the mid-1300s. All

three languages jockeyed for position. And despite the terms of this law, French continued to be used beside English in the courts for another century or so.

What really matters here isn't the practical effect of the law, it's the symbolic effect. For the first time, the government declared that English was to be used for official purposes, thereby giving the language a legitimacy that it hadn't had for three centuries. It is often said by scholars that this law made English the 'official' language of the country again for the first time since the Norman Conquest. The law also reflected the growing power of the English middle class – the merchants, the craftsmen, the yeomen, and the many other people who only spoke English. They not only preferred the use of English, they were also suspicious of French. Notice that the statute gave two reasons why it was necessary for people to speak English in the courts. First, because so few people understood French, and second, because 'great mischief' occurred when the law was written and enforced in French. This reflects the views of the rising middle class – not the views of the established nobles who either spoke French or had access to lawyers and representatives who spoke French. It was the lower classes who viewed the French-speaking courts with suspicion and scepticism.

The other giveaway is the part of the statute that says that the use of English in the courts would help people to 'keep and defend their inheritances and possessions.' This provision reminds us that this was an era when the courts were clogged with people trying to make their claims to the property of deceased relatives. And they wanted to make sure that their claims were heard in the language they understood.

So this law – the Statute of Pleading – is an important landmark in the history of English. It marks the official recognition of English as the primary language of England. English was now the spoken language in the courts and in Parliament, and it was also being used in the schoolrooms. So English was now being used in most of the environments where French had once been used as the primary language.

Of course, French remained an important language. It was still the dominant cultural and literary language of western Europe. By this point, about 10,000 French words had been borrowed into English. And since it remained a prestige language, French words continued to flow into English over the next few centuries. But the current point in our story marks an important transition in the way English borrowed from French.

Up to this point, English speakers still borrowed words from the native Anglo-Norman dialect that had developed within England after the Norman Conquest. That was the dialect spoken by the original Normans which was distinct from the French dialect of Paris. And that Norman dialect had evolved within England so that it became distinct from the dialect spoken back in Normandy.

For the first 150 years or so after the Conquest, that Anglo-Norman dialect was the French dialect spoken in England, and almost all French loanwords came from that dialect. Then around the year 1200, after bad King John lost most of the English possessions in France, the Anglo-Norman dialect started to become more stigmatized, and the French of Paris became more

valued. And for the next 150 years of so, English increasingly borrowed words from standard French even though the Anglo-Norman dialect was still being spoken. I discussed that transitional phase back in Episode 99.

Well, now in the mid-1300s, we have another transition. With the ascent of English, and the prestige of the French spoken in Paris, there was no longer any room for the Anglo-Norman dialect. It was ridiculed in Paris as bad French. And most people in England agreed with that sentiment. It came to be mocked within England as well. It was soon abandoned altogether in favor of English, which was now accepted as the primary language of England. And if people wanted to speak French, they opted to learn the French spoken in Paris, which was the standard literary dialect of French. For most practical purposes, the Anglo-Norman dialect died out over the next generation or so.

This fact was reflected in the writings of that commoner's son who became a royal servant and diplomat, and who later became the famous poet of Middle English. When Geoffrey Chaucer composed his Canterbury Tales a few years later, one of his pilgrims was a high-born prioress. Since she was upper class, she spoke French, but Chaucer was quick to point out that she spoke the lowly French of England, not the proper French of Paris. He wrote:

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

In Modern English:

> And French she spoke very well and gracefully
> After the school at Stratford at Bow
> For the French of Paris was to her unknown

It was probably the decline of the Anglo-Norman dialect, and the ascent of English, that led Chaucer to compose his poetry in English. Up until now, most poets preferred to use French – the language of the court and the language that was read throughout Europe. But Chaucer elected to use English, a language that was only spoken in the British Isles. And he wasn't the only writer to make that choice. Most of the greatest works of Middle English literature were composed over the next generation, and that was no coincidence. The people of England were proud of their language again, and they were eager to put it on full display. Writers throughout England started to put it though its paces and show what it was capable of producing. And it was capable of producing some of the most important literature ever composed in the language.

As we move forward with the story of English, we'll explore those developments, and we'll also explore some of those wonderful works of literature.

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