THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 122: THE NAME OF THE GAME

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 122: THE NAME OF THE GAME

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 122: The Name of the Game. In this episode, we're going to explore the events leading to the first major poem composed by Geoffrey Chaucer. This story will take us though the 1360s – a decade in which the power of the peasants was growing stronger and the Hundred Years War continued to simmer. It was also an era in which archery was considered to be the only pastime in the national interest, so most other games and sports were outlawed. Despite those restrictions, most people continued to entertain themselves with games that were popular at the time, and many of those games evolved into the games and sports we play today. Along the way, these activities contributed lots of words and phrases to the English language. So this time, we'll explore the those developments, and we'll see how they impacted the English language

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

Now this time, I want to pick up the story where we left off last time – with the official recognition of English as the language of the English Parliament and the courts. As you may recall, the English Parliament adopted a law in the year 1362 which gave English an official status for the first time since the Norman Conquest. The law was called the Statute of Pleading, and it reflected the rise of the peasants and yeomen – the traditional English-speaking classes in England.

But the rise of these lower classes did meet with resistence. Parliament was still controlled by the nobility and the gentry, and last time we saw that Parliament tried to limit the wages that peasants could demand in the wake of the plague. Well now, the king also took aim at the working classes – or maybe I should say that he made the working classes take aim.

The king was Edward III, and in the year 1363 – the year after the Statute of Pleading – he issued a proclamation ordering that all able-bodied men take up the sport of archery. And to reinforce that mandate, he took the additional step of prohibiting all other sports in England. Now this order had one main purpose – to make sure that the English army had enough archers to fill its ranks and to ensure that England maintained its military advantage over France. As I've noted before, the main advantage which the English had in battle was the longbow which took many years to master. Ideally, the archers were trained from youth to handle the bow. And in the early years of the Hundred Years War, the French had no effective answer for the weapon.

So Edward III wanted the young men of his kingdom to spend their spare time with the bow and arrow rather than wasting their time with the sports usually played by commoners on the village green. Archery was considered a more noble and more practical pursuit. So everyone was required to pick up the bow and arrow, and they were told to stop playing ball games and any other games involving the throwing of objects.

Now this proclamation is fascinating for a few reasons. It gives an insight into the types of games that people played in the 1300s. It also suggests that certain games and sports were associated with specific classes of society. As far as the nobles were concerned, games that prepared you for war were good for society and were encouraged. But ball games played by commoners and peasants served no social purpose and were therefore a waste of time. So Edward's plan was to sanction and mandate the former, and to outlaw the latter.

With respect to the former, the sports of the nobles included fencing and archery. It also included horse-riding and jousting, especially at the large tournaments held in England and France. And it including hunting and falconry.

Not only was the hunt considered a type of game, it was sometimes called 'the game of hunting' or simply 'the game.' *Game* is an Old English word which not only meant a contest or competition, it also meant amusement or pleasure in general. And the nobles found pleasure in the challenge of the hunt or the chase. And around the current point in our overall story in the mid-1300s, the word *game* started to be extended to the hunt itself. And around the same time, it came to refer to the animals pursued in the hunt or chase. And that's the other sense of the word *game* today. It even produced a separate adjective – the word *gamey* referring to something having the flavor or smell of wild game.

So today, the word *game* had an extended sense well beyond its original meaning as a contest or sporting event. But even when restricted to a type of competition, it can encompass many different types of activities. And many of the games we play today have their roots in the Middle Ages.

Around the year 1180, a cleric named William Fitzstephen wrote a detailed description of the city of London. I mentioned this account in an earlier episode a long time ago. It's one of the few detailed accounts of life in London in the early Norman period. In his account, William described the games and sports that residents of London played at the time. He described cock-fighting, fencing, sword-fighting, leaping, wrestling, archery, jousting and javelin throwing. He said the people would go ice skating when the lakes froze over. And he also mentioned a game of ball played by young boys in the fields around town.

William's account was written in Latin, but the ball game he described was probably the sport known as *camp-ball*. And camp-ball was an early version of modern-day football or soccer. Now I've discussed the word *camp* in earlier episodes. You might remember that *camp* is derived from the Latin word *campus* meaning an open field. The open field was the place where troops gathered during military campaigns. That gave us the sense of the word *camp* as a place where people make a temporary home outside in the open. It also gave us the word *campaign*.

A *camp* – or open field – was also a place where people gathered to play sports and other games. And during the later Middle Ages, the word *camp* was extended to this ball game played in the open fields of England. And that sport became known as *camp* or *camp-ball*.

2

Now the term *camp-ball* isn't actually found in English documents until the 1600s, but when it was used in those documents, it was used in reference to a sport that was played in earlier generations. Those writers in the 1600s were referencing an older game played in parts of county in earlier centuries which they said was called *camp-ball*. So it appears that this was an old name for the sport, but no one knows for sure just how old it was.

So we don't know for sure if the people of the 1300s called this sport *camp-ball*, but it does appear that it was one of the sports which drew the ire of Edward III, and it was one of the sports outlawed by his proclamation in 1363. The sport was apparently targeted because the nobles perceived it as an uncivilized and dangerous game played by commoners. They also targeted the game because it was so popular. There were too many people playing ball, and not enough people practicing archery.

This early game of football probably didn't have fixed rules. The game likely varied a little bit from place to place, but generally speaking, it was a game played with a ball in an open field. There were two teams which sometimes included the whole population of a village or small town. Each team tried to advance the ball up the field against the other team. There were usually two goals on each side of the field. The sport may have resembled a blend of rugby and football or soccer. It appears that players could either kick the ball with their feet or pick it up and throw it or run with it. Gloucester Cathedral is a cathedral located in the west of England, and there is an engraving on the building from the early 1300s. It shows two men playing this early version of football with one player lunging at the ball and the other player making a kicking motion in the direction of the ball. However, the ball itself is placed up high near the players hands which suggests that the players could use their hands as well as their feet.

The sport probably had very loose rules, and when it was played, it likely resembled a melee. Lots of players were hurt, and some were even killed during the game. And it encouraged feuds between the two sides that often led to further violence after the game – often in the streets. That probably contributed to the desire to ban the sport, but Edward's prohibition didn't meet with much success. People kept playing this game. And future kings also tried to pass similar prohibitions – again with little or no effect. By the way, the first recorded reference to this game as *football* occurred in the year 1409 about a half century later in our story, though it is certainly possible that it was being used in common speech in the 1300s.

Football may have been derived from an earlier French term with the same meaning. It is probably a direct translation using the native English words *foot* and *ball*. By the current point in our story in the 1300s, the word *ball* had already been extended from the physical object itself to a game played with a ball. Thus, *football* is the game of ball played with the feet.

Now, going back to Edward III's proclamation which banned ball games, it was composed in Latin, and the banned games are described as (quote) "Pilam manualem, pedinam, et bacculoream, et ad cambucam, etc." (end-quote) That passage literally translates as 'balls propelled by hand, by foot, by club, or by hook-shaped stick.' So that tells us that people were playing a variety of ball games, and they were using a variety of implements to propel the ball.

The first part restricts the playing of games where balls are thrown or propelled by hand. This would have included the sport that became known as *tennis*. The French introduced the game to England around the current point in our story in the 1300s. At this point, it was more like handball. It was played indoors, and rackets were not used yet, so players batted the ball around with their hands. In fact, the French called the sport 'jeu de paume' which meant 'game of the palm.' Now it was apparently common for players to yell out the French word *Tenez!* before they served. *Tenez!* basically meant 'Hold' or 'Hold this,' but it really meant 'Here, take this!' And it appears that English speakers adopted that call or expression as the name of the game, thereby creating the name *tennis* which first appeared in writing around the year 1400.

Now that's the traditional theory for the origin of the name, but there is a contrary theory that suggests that the game originated in the Arab world, and the word *tennis* is actually an Arabic word – *tanaz* – meaning to leap or bound. This was a theory encouraged by the great etymologist Charles Earle Funk who wrote several books about English etymology in the mid-1900s.

At any rate, at some point during this period, the game started to be played with a *racquet*, and in fact the word *racquet* appeared for the first time in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer. The word was borrowed from French, so it also came into English around this time. But interestingly, when Chaucer used the word *racquet*, he used it to refer to the sport itself. So initially, *racquet* was just a synonym of *tennis* – but by the 1500s, when players were routinely using stringed bats or paddles to hit the ball, the word *racquet* was extended from the game to the implement used in the game, and that gave us the modern meaning of the word as 'tennis racquet.'

Tennis may not have used racquets in the mid-1300s, but other sports did use sticks and clubs and bats and other similar implements. Remember that Edward's proclamation banned all games in which a ball was hit with either a club or a hook-shaped stick. These passages were probably intended to include a common sport which evolved out of a shepherd's pastime.

For centuries, shepherds throughout Europe used the curved ends of their staffs to hit rocks and stones. Sometimes they would try to hit a distant target like a tree or a post, and sometimes they would try to knock the stone into a rabbit hole. This activity eventually evolved into the sport we know today as *golf*. Over time, this pastime spread from the countryside into the towns and villages. People used wooden clubs to hit wooden balls in the streets, and courtyards and village greens. By the current point in our story in the 1300s, this pastime was popular in Flanders and the Netherlands where it was called *kolven* or *kolf*. That name comes from a Dutch word meaning 'club or stick.' And it is apparently the ultimate source of the English word *golf*.

The rules of modern golf started to be formulated at St. Andrews in Scotland in the early 1400s, but it appears than an early version of the game was being played in England in the mid-1300s. This was probably a more informal version of the game – similar to the game that was being played across the Channel in Flanders and the Netherlands. One piece of evidence that the game was being played in England in this earlier period is Edward III's ban which specifically included sports where people hit balls with clubs and hook-shaped sticks. That provision was included for a reason.

But another piece of evidence can be found at that cathedral in Gloucester that I mentioned earlier. Not only does that cathedral have an engraving showing two men playing an early version of football, it also has a large stained glass window showing a person swinging what appears to be an early form of a golf club. The golfer is shown in one panel of a massive stained glass window on the east side of the cathedral. The entire window is as big as a modern tennis court, and it was one of the largest windows in the world at the time it was added to the cathedral around the year 1350. It was actually commissioned by a knight to commemorate English soldiers who had died at the battle of Crecy in northern France. So this window pre-dates Edward's sports ban by about a decade, and it has the panel showing a man swinging what appears to be an early golf club. It is considered to be the oldest depiction of golf in the British Isles.

As I noted, the rules of modern golf started to be formulated at St. Andrews on the eastern coast of Scotland in the early part of the following century. The main innovation there was for players to play the game on a specific course where the balls had to be hit into a series of distant holes – marked by poles sticking out of the ground. By the mid-1400s, the game was well-established, and the modern word *golf* had entered the English language. Again, the word was apparently borrowed from that Dutch game called *kolven* or *kolf*.

Now today, if you play golf, you might have a specific handicap which is based the number of strokes over par that you usually average when playing a course. And that word *handicap* also has its origins in the Middle Ages. And in fact, it has its origins in another medieval game.

The word *handicap* began as part of a game that was played in the 1300s called 'new fair.' A fair was place where items were bought and sold, and this game of 'new fair' was a type of trading game. It could be played as a gambling game or it could also be used as a way to settle a dispute if two people were negotiating the purchase or sale of an item.

The rules varied, but in a common version, you and I might have a couple of items that we want to exchange. Let's say we each have a cloak that we want to trade, but I think my cloak is worth a lot more than your's. We can't agree on the difference in value or even if there is a difference in value, so we agree to play this game called 'new fair.' We bring in a friend who acts an umpire. We all three put some money in a hat or cap held by the umpire. So the umpire is playing too. The money in the cap is a random amount of money. It's basically the prize. Now you and I both place our hands in the cap, and the umpire estimates the value of each cloak. He is basically the appraiser, and he determines that my cloak is worth 3 shillings, and your's is worth 2. So if we're going to make a deal, you have to give me a shilling to make up for the difference in value. Each of us then pull our hands out of the cap. If we agree with the umpire's valuation, we pull our hand out opened. If we disagree, we pull our hand out closed. If both of our hands are open, it means we both agree with the umpire's appraisal, and we complete the trade. You add in the extra shilling, and the umpire keeps the money in the hat. He has basically done a good job. He's made a good appraisal and allowed us to complete the trade, so he keeps the prize money. Now if both of our hands are closed when we remove them from the cap, it means we both disagree with the umpire's appraisal. So we don't trade our cloaks, and you don't owe me the shilling, but again the umpire keeps the money in the hat. The reason why he keeps the money is because he

again has done his job, he came with a number that was two low for me and too high for you, but it was somewhere in the middle, so even though we don't accept the number, he keeps the prize money in the hat. But if you and I remove our hands from the cap, and one hand is open and the other is closed, it means that one of us liked the umpire's valuation and the other didn't. In that case, again there is no deal, so there's no trade. But the person whose hand was open and agreed to the valuation gets to keep the prize money in the cap. That money in the cap was the incentive for each of us to agree with the valuation. If I agreed with umpire, it meant that I either made the deal with you or I got to keep the money in the cap. If you kept your hand closed because you disagreed with the umpire's valuation, you kept your cloak, but you lost the money you put in the cap. So there was an incentive to agree with valuation if the number was close to what you wanted. Of course, the umpire was also risking his money in the cap as well. So there was an incentive for the umpire to be fair and reasonable in his valuation. Otherwise he would lose the money he placed in the cap. To put it another way, the only way the umpire would lose his money in the cap is if his valuation was either too high or too low so that only one of us agreed to it. As long as the value was somewhere in the middle, we would both either accept or reject the number, and he would keep the prize money. So that's the basic idea behind this negotiating game.

Again, this game was called 'new fair' around the current point in our story in the 1300s, but it soon became known as 'hand-in-cap.' And from there, it gave us the word *handicap* which appeared as a distinct word for the game in the 1600s. The idea behind *handicap* is that it was a way to determine the relative difference in value between two items. Specifically, it was a way to determine exactly how much less value one item had relative to another. So the word came to be used within horse racing and golf when methods were adopted to estimate the relative skill levels of horses or golfers. And the word *handicap* came to refer to that difference in skill level.

So, via sports, the meaning of the word was extended from a difference in monetary value to a difference in ability or skill level. And then in the 1800s, it was further extended to a person who has physical disability which may put them at a disadvantage relative to another person. So the modern non-sporting sense of the word *handicap* was derived from the sporting sense, and the sporting sense was derived from this popular game of the Middle Ages called 'new fair' or 'hand-in-cap.'

So modern golfers determine their golf handicap, but they also try to avoid hazards like bunkers and lakes. And the word *hazard* is another word that can be traced back to the games of the Middle Ages. I discussed the origin of the word *hazard* back in Episode 91. You might remember that *hazard* was a dice game which Europeans picked up during the Crusades from players in the Near East. There is some dispute about the ultimate origin of the word, but one popular theory is that it is based on an Arabic word for dice. The game eventually evolved into the modern dice game known as craps. It was a game of chance, and therefore there was always a risk of losing. And that risk or peril associated with the game gave us the modern sense of the word *hazard*.

Now dice games like hazard were popular throughout England. The winters tended to be long and cold and wet, so people looked for games that could be played indoors, and these types of games found an eager audience in England. Board games like chess were also popular for many of the same reasons. And one very popular game combined both activities. It was a board game that used dice. This game had its origins in the Near East at some point in the distant past. Along with chess, it found its way into western Europe during the Crusades. In this particular board game, each player had a series of game pieces, and a roll of the dice determined the movement of the pieces across the board. Since it was a board game, it was usually played at a table, and in France it was called 'jeux de tables' – literally 'game of the tables.' English adopted that name, and in England, it was simply known as *tables*. But by the 1600s, English-speakers had developed a native English term for one version of the game. That name is *backgammon*.

Backgammon is a compound word made up of two native English terms – *back* and *gammon*. And if *gammon* doesn't sound familiar to you, well that's because it's actually the original version of the word *game*. In Old English, the word *game* was actually *gamen*. That 'n' sound at the end remained for much of the Middle English period. It wasn't really lost until the Modern English period. So *backgammon* was literally the 'back game,' and that was because the players sometimes had to move their pieces back to the starting point.

But again, at the current point in our story in the 1300s, the game was still known as *tables*. And that name is widely believed to have been the origin of the phrase 'turn the tables.' If you 'turn the tables' on someone, you reverse your respective positions. It's often used to refer to a situation where a disadvantage is turned into an advantage. Apparently, when playing board games, it was somewhat common for game players to literally turn the tables and exchange places during a game. This was also done for other board games like chess. The phrase 'turn the tables' isn't actually found in writing until the 1600s, but when it first appeared, it was used in the context of gaming. The turning of the game board was used as a metaphor for a reversal of fortune.

Now there is a modern variation of backgammon called *acey-deucey*. In this particular game, if a player rolls the dice and one die lands on one and the other die lands on two, then special rules apply. And that's why the game is called *acey-deucey*. In dice games, the side of the die with one dot is called an *ace* and the side with two dots is called a *deuce*. Both terms come from French. Now those terms are probably familiar to you today from playing cards, but we're about a decade away from the introduction of playing cards to western Europe. So before *ace* and *deuce* were used in cards, they were used in dice.

In fact, each of the sides of the die was once known by numbers derived from French. The word *ace* was derived from the name of an old Roman coin. The word was borrowed into English from French in the early 1300s. The names of the other five sides were derived from the numbers two through six in Old French. As I noted, two was called *deuce*, and it is first appeared in English documents in the 1400s. Three was called *trey* (T-R-E-Y), and it first appeared in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1380s. Four was called a *cater* (/cæt-er/) – or /cay-ter/ after the Great Vowel Shift. It was spelled C-A-T-E-R, and it first appeared in English documents in the 1500s, even though it was probably in common use before then. Five dots on the die was called *cinque*

(C-I-N-Q-U-E) from the French word for five. Again, *cinque* was first used in reference to dice in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1380s. And the side with six dots was called *sice* (/seece/) – or /saice/ after the Great Vowel Shift. And again, that word appears for the first time in English in the writings of Chaucer in the 1380s. So the formal names of three of the six sides of a die were first used by Chaucer.

And Chaucer was also the first person to use a phrase that can apparently be traced back to those names. That was the phrase 'at sixes and sevens.' If you say that something is 'at sixes and sevens,' it means that it is in a state of confusion or disarray. And if two people are 'at sixes and sevens' with each other, it means that they are fighting or arguing. Again, the first recorded use of this phrase was in Chaucer's poem called Troilus & Criseyde in the 1370s.

He used the phrase in the sense of carelessly risking one's fortune, and it was apparently derived from a similar phrase which used those French words for the sides of a die. That other phrase was 'to set at cinque or sice,' and again, Chaucer's writings contain the first use of that phrase as well. Now 'to set at cinque or sice' literally meant to 'set at five or six on the die.' Those are the two highest numbers you can roll, and the meaning implied that you were risking your entire fortune on the highest possible rolls of the die. To do so was a very careless act, and that sense of carelessness or throwing caution to the wind led to the more modern sense of confusion or disorder.

So why did this original phrase meaning 'to be at five or six' evolve into the modern phrase 'to be at sixes and sevens'? I mean, a die doesn't have seven sides. Well, one possibility is that the phrase 'at sixes and sevens' took the original concept one step further. It implied an impossible bet since you couldn't actually roll a seven on a die, so it meant an even more ridiculous or careless wager.

Another theory is that English speakers wanted to maintain the alliteration of the original phrase 'at cinque or sice' with its repeating 's' sounds. A literal translation of the phrase is 'at five or six,' but that translation loses the original alliteration. However, by shifting each number up by one, you get 'at sixes and sevens,' which has the same 's' alliteration as the original. So that may be why the numbers shifted within English. I should also note that there are some competing theories about the ultimate origin of this phrase, but the Oxford English Dictionary adopts the version I've presented here. And the fact the Chaucer was the first known writer to use both versions of the phrase suggests that the two phrases were linked together at one time, and the modern phrase is therefore derived from the original phrase which specifically referred to dice.

Chaucer also introduced another common word related to dice. And that's the word *raffle*. Now it may come as a surprise that the word *raffle* was originally related to dice, but it was. It was a game involving three dice. Each player would throw the dice, and if all three dice landed on the same number, that player automatically won the round. Otherwise, the player with the highest combination of any two of the dice won. The game was called *raffle* from the French name of the game. And again, Geoffrey Chaucer was the first known English writer to refer to the game with that name and to use the term in his writings. He used it in the Parson's Tale within the

Canterbury Tales. Since then, the word *raffle* has evolved to encompass other games of chance, specifically lottery style games where the winner is chosen at random by a drawing.

So Chaucer was the first writer to use the words for three sides of the dice. And he was the first to use the phrases 'at cinque or sice' and 'at sixes and sevens,' both of which apparently relate to dice. And he was the first English writer to use the word *raffle* which was also a dice game. These terms are spread across the Canterbury Tales, as well as his earlier poem Troilus & Criseyde. So it's fair to assume that he was very familiar with games involving dice.

I began this discussion about games with Edward III's ban on most sports other than archery in the year 1363. At that time, Chaucer was about 20 years old. We know from the last episode that he was serving in the king's service as a soldier, a yeoman, and a low-level diplomat. It's also possible that he was already composing poetry for the king's court by this point.

The University of Pennsylvania has in its possession a manuscript which was compiled in England in the late 1350s or early 1360s – so around the current point in our overall story. The manuscript contains a collection of poems that were composed in or for the royal court. There are 310 poems in all, and they are all composed in the traditional style of courtly poems. And they are all composed in French. Three of those poems have the initials 'Ch,' so it appears that someone with those initials composed those three poems, and some scholars think those initials stand for 'Chaucer.' Now, there's simply no way to know for sure, but it is possible that these are the oldest surviving poems composed by Geoffrey Chaucer. If that's the case, these would be the only surviving poems which he composed in French. But again, all we have are initials, and those initials may represent the name of some other poet in the court at the time.

Even though scholars are not sure if Chaucer composed those three early court poems, they are sure that he got married a short time after those poems were composed. A young lady working in the queen's household was named Philippa – and the government records from 1366 list her as 'Phillipa Chaucer.' So she and Geoffrey were married by that date.

Now around the time Chaucer married Phillipa, he worked on another poem, and this is the oldest surviving poem which is clearly attributed to him. It's actually an English translation of a French poem called Roman de la Rose, or in English 'The Romance of the Rose.' Again, this was a translation, not an original work, and Chaucer only translated part of the poem. So we still have to wait a little bit longer for a surviving original work. But that's coming very soon.

The next official mention of Chaucer's activities occurred in 1366 – the same year as the records which confirm his marriage to Phillipa. In that year, he left England on another diplomatic mission – this time to Navarre in northern Spain. The nature of the mission to Navarre is unknown, but modern scholars suspect that the trip had to do with what was happening in the neighboring kingdom of Castille.

Without getting too bogged down in the details, the gist of the problem was that the throne of Castille was being disputed between two claimants, one of whom was allied with France and the other was allied with England. Castille was a powerful kingdom in northern Spain, and the claimant who was allied with England was named Pedro.

Now Castille in northern Spain was located just across the Pyrenees from Gascony in southern France. And as we know, Gascony was controlled by the English king, specifically by the king's son known as the Black Prince.

Well, there was one tiny kingdom located between Gascony and Castille, and that was this kingdom of Navarre. And that's where Geoffrey Chaucer was sent as a diplomat in 1366. Again, we don't know exactly what Chaucer's mission was, but it seems likely that it had something to do with the English support of Pedro next door in Castille.

At any rate, Pedro was soon defeated and forced out of Castille. He then turned to the Black Prince for help, and the Black Prince led a campaign to Castille to return Pedro to the throne. The campaign was a success, and Pedro once again became the king, giving England an important ally in the region.

Now at the time, this was seen as another great victory for England and the Black Prince, but it soon turned sour. Pedro had promised to the pay the Black Prince back for the cost of the campaign – over a quarter of a million pounds. But once Pedro was back on the throne, he couldn't raise the money to pay the debt. So the Black Prince suddenly found himself near bankruptcy.

On top of that, he contracted some type of illness during the campaign – perhaps a form a dysentery or malaria. Whatever it was, he never recovered from it. Even though he lived for several more years, his health deteriorated with each passing year.

As bad as all of that was, things soon went from bad to worse for the Black Prince. He was officially the Duke of Aquitaine, so in an attempt to get out of his massive debt, he levied heavy taxes on the nobles and other landholders of Aquitaine. But by that point, they had had enough of the Black Prince and his taxes, so they rose in rebellion against him. John of Gaunt was the younger brother of the Black Prince, and he soon left England to join his brother in Gascony to deal with the rebels. By this point, Geoffrey Chaucer was back in England, but when John of Gaunt left to go to Aquitaine, Chaucer went with him. Chaucer's role is not recorded, but the records show that he was paid 10 pounds for his service in John's retinue.

At this point, the French king decided to get in on the action. He threw his support toward the rebels in Aquitaine, and he mounted his own campaigns against the Black Prince. The French king was now Charles V – son of King John who I discussed in the last episode. And Charles was a formidable king. He is known to history as Charles the Wise, and he 'turned the tables' on the English during the Hundred Years War. The English dominance during the early phases of the war quickly came to an end, and over the next few months and years, Charles managed to re-claim much of the French territory that had been lost under his predecessors.

The final two years of the decade were horrible years for the English monarchy. In 1369, Pedro was assassinated in Castille, and the region once again became allied with France. So the Black Prince's whole effort there accomplished nothing. Meanwhile, the Black Prince's health continued to decline, he was in heavy debt, he was facing a rebellion within his own duchy, and he was also facing a resurgent French army on his borders. He incurred one loss after another in Aquitaine, and within a couple of years, he was forced to abandon Aquitaine altogether and return to England a broken man.

In the midst of all of this bad news, another round of death struck the royal family in 1368 and 1369. The Queen of England died. So did the king and queen's second eldest son Lionel. That left Edward the Black Prince and John of Gaunt as the two eldest children. But as I just noted, the Black Prince was sick and growing sicker by the month. And the king – Edward III – was also getting old and withdrawing from public life. Suddenly, John of Gaunt emerged as one of the most important figures in the royal family.

His father and his elder brothers were either in very poor health or dead. Meanwhile, John was already one of the most powerful nobles in England given his status as the Duke of Lancaster. As I noted in the last episode, he received that duchy through his wife Blanche. She had inherited it from her father who died from the plague. So John and Blanche were the Duke and Duchess of Lancaster, and outside of the king and queen, they were the most prominent couple in England.

But death was not yet done with the royal family. In September of 1368, Blanche also passed away. The cause of her death is a little unclear. Some sources say that she died from another round of plague. Others say that she died in childbirth. Either way, her death left John of Gaunt as a widower while he was still on campaign in France. And as I noted earlier, Geoffrey Chaucer was serving in John's retinue at the time.

Now all of this is very important to our story because John of Gaunt, and Chaucer, and the rest of John's men, eventually made their way back to England. And soon after they returned, it appears that John of Gaunt asked Chaucer to compose a poem to commemorate Blanche's death. And that poem is the oldest surviving original poem composed by Geoffrey Chaucer.

The poem is known today as 'The Book of the Duchess,' and it shows that Chaucer and John of Gaunt already had a pretty close relationship by this point in the late 1360s. John eventually became an unpopular figure in England, but he was a strong advocate for the English language. And he was Chaucer's primary patron. And their literary relationship really began with this poem commemorating the death of John's wife. After returning to England, John arranged for Blanche to be buried at St. Paul's Cathedral. He also reserved a tomb for himself to be buried beside her. And each year thereafter, he held a memorial service for Blanche at the cathedral. It appears that Chaucer composed his poem to be read at one of those memorial services. So this was a courtly poem composed at the request of and for the benefit of one of the leading nobles of England.

As such, the poem was composed in the style of French poetry that was normally recited at court, but Chaucer used English rather than French. And that was really a major innovation.

The poem is written in first person, and it begins with the poet trying to sleep, but he lies awake thinking of a woman he loves who does not love him in return. The poet then recalls a recent night when his insomnia forced him to grab a book. In Modern English, the passage reads:

But lately now, this other night,
Upon my bed I sat upright,
And asked someone bring me a book,
A romance, and this I took
To read and drive the night away,
Since I thought it better play
Than chess or backgammon tables.
And in this book were written fables
That scholars had in ancient times,
And other poets, put in rhymes
To read and preserve in my mind
When men still lived by law of kind.

Now here's Chaucer's original verse:

Til now late, this other night,
Upon my bedde I sat upright
And bad oon reche me a book,
A romaunce, and he hit me took
To rede and dryve the night away;
For me thoghte it better play
Then playen either at ches or tables.
And in this boke were writen fables
That clerkes hadde, in olde tyme,
And other poets, put in ryme
To rede, and for to be in minde
Whyl men loved the lawe of kinde.

In this passage, we get a sense of Chaucer's love of games. He says that it was better to read to a book than play chess or tables. We know from earlier in the episode that **tables** was the common word at the time for the game that became known as **backgammon**. So it was better to read than to play board games. As we'll see, Chaucer refers to games throughout the poem.

While reading the book, the poet finally falls asleep. And at that point, the poem turns into a dream vision as the narrator recalls the dream he had. In his dream, he awoke in the springtime. Birds were singing on his roof. And his room had been fully transformed. Color and light filled his chamber. Bright beams of light from the sun came in through the windows. The entire Greek legend of Troy was depicted on the glass windows. And the poet says that the entire text of the Romance of the Rose was written on the walls. Chaucer writes:

And all the walls with colors fine
Were painted, both text and gloss,
Of all of the Romance of the Rose.

This is a notable passage because Chaucer specifically refers to the French poem that he had partially translated a few years earlier. That poem was obviously important to Chaucer because he referenced it again here.

The poet then tells us that he heard a commotion outside of his window. It was a hunter blowing his horn. Then he heard other hunters with their horses and dogs. So the poet went outside, and mounted his horse and joined the hunting party. But the hunters soon lost track of the deer they were chasing, and the poet decided to withdraw from the hunt. Suddenly, a small dog appeared, and the narrator followed the dog to a secluded area in the woods teaming with deer and rabbits and all kinds of other wildlife. Of the wildlife, Chaucer tells us the following:

But forth they roamed wondrously fast
Down the wood, till at the last
I was aware of a man in black
That sat there, and turned his back
Against an oak: a huge tree.
'Lord,' thought I, 'who may this be?
What ails him so that he sits here?'
And right along I went full near;
Then I found there sitting upright
A handsome and well-faring knight,

Here's the same passage in Chaucer's original Middle English.

But forth they romed wonder faste
Doun the wode; so at the laste
I was war of a man in blak,
That sat and had yturned his bak
To an ook, an huge tree.
`Lord,' thoghte I, `who may that be?
What ayleth him to sitten here?'
Anoon-right I wente nere;
Than fond I sitte even upright
A wonder wel-faringe knight

So the poet came across a knight wearing black and sitting under an oak tree. The knight was clearly in mourning. We soon find out through some subtle – and some 'not so subtle' – references that this knight is intended to represent John of Gaunt. And everyone listening to the poem would have immediately known why he was in mourning.

The poet says that the knight was reciting a mournful poem to himself about the death of his lover. So the poet approached the knight assuming that he was part of the hunting party. The poet says that he told the knight that the deer was lost, but the knight was not interested in the hunt. In Modern English, the passage reads:

'Sir,' said I, 'the game is done;
I think that the deer is gone;
The huntsmen nowhere can it see.'
'I take no thought of that,' said he;

Now here's Chacuer's original passage.

`Sir,' quod I, `this game is doon;
I holde that this hert be goon;
Thise huntes conne him nowher see.'
`I do no fors therof,' quod he,

Now in this passage, Chaucer actually uses the word *game* for the hunt itself. So he makes it very clear that the hunt was a game. As I noted earlier in the episode, this is how the word *game* acquired its secondary meaning as wild animals. The hunt was a game, and over time, the animals that were pursued became known as *game*. And we can clearly see that connection in this passage.

The poet tells us that the lonely knight was not interested in the hunt. He was pining for his lover. The knight explained that he had lost the woman he loved. Fortune had taken her away. And notice how the knight expresses this loss. Here's the passage – first in Modern English:

My boldness is turned to shame,
For false Fortune has played a game
Of chess with me, alas, the while!
The traitress false and full of guile

Now in Middle English.

`My boldnesse is turned to shame,
For fals Fortune hath pleyd a game
Atte ches with me, allas, the whyle!
The trayteresse fals and ful of gyle,

So Fortune had deceived the knight and defeated him at a game of chess. And then, a few lines later, the poet tells us more. The knight elaborates on his game with Fortune in the following passage:

. . . By our Lord, I will to you say.
At chess with me she began to play;
With her false moves diversely seen
She stole upon me and took my queen.
And when I saw my queen away,
Alas, I could no longer play,
But said, 'Farewell, sweet, by this,
And farewell all that ever there is!'
Therewith Fortune said, 'Check, here!'
And 'Mate!' in mid-point of the checker
With an errant pawn, alas!
Full craftier at play she was
Than Athalus, who first the game
Of chess made; such was his name.
I wish to God that once or twice
I'd studied and learnt the jeopardies
Known to the Greek Pythagoras,
I should have played the better at chess
And better kept my queen thereby.
Yet, in truth, I say, what for and why?

Here's the same passage in Chaucer's original Middle English.

. . . By our Lord, I wol thee seye.
Atte ches with me she gan to pleye;
With hir false draughtes divers
She stal on me, and took my fers.
And whan I saw my fers aweye,
Alas! I couthe no lenger playe,
But seyde, "Farewel, swete, y-wis,
And farwel al that ever ther is!
Therwith Fortune seyde, "Chek her!"
And "Mate!" in mid pointe of the chekker
With a poune erraunt, allas!
Ful craftier to pley she was
Than Athalus, that made the game
First of the ches: so was his name.
But God wolde I had ones or twyes
Y-koud and knowe the jeupardyes
That koude the Grek Pithagores!
I shulde have pleyd the bet at ches,
And kept my fers the bet therby;
And thogh wherto? for trewely,

Now in that passage, we get a very explicit analogy between the loss of a game of chess and the loss of a lover. The knight says that Fortune defeated him at chess and took his queen. I should also note a few other things about that passage. First, Chaucer uses the word *fers* for queen. ***Fers*** was the French name for that chess piece, and it was commonly used in English until the 1700s. In fact, this poem contains the first known use of the word in English.

Now that word *fers* is ultimately derived from Persian and Arabic because the game of chess originated in India and passed through Persia and the Arab world before it made its way to Europe during the Crusades. So a lot of chess terminology can be traced back to Persian and Arabic. That includes the word *chess* itself, as well as the phrase 'Check Mate' which was originally 'Shah Mat.'

I mentioned this in an earlier episode, but *shah* meant 'king' in Persian, and the goal of chess was to capture the king. When the opponent's king was trapped and couldn't escape, the winning player would say 'Shah Mat' meaning 'the king is helpless.' This phrase 'Shah Mat' evolved into English 'Check Mate.' And through the same general process, the word *shah* as used in early chess gave us the words *chess*, *check* and *checkers*. I discussed all of that etymology way back in Episode 73 when I first talked about the introduction of chess to Europe.

Well in the passage I just read, we can see how Chaucer used those terms for poetic effect. At this point in history, the word *checker* referred to the chessboard itself. That's how England got the office of the Exchequer where accountings were made on a grid that resembled a chessboard. And in this passage, Chaucer used the word *checker* as a homophone for the phrase 'Check, here!' He wrote:

Therewith Fortune said, 'Check, here!'
And 'Mate!' in mid-point of the checker

In Middle English 'check here' and 'checker' would have been pronounced almost the same.

Now today, checkers is a distinct game played on the same type of game board as chess. ***Checkers*** is the common name in the US, but in the UK it is commonly known as ***draughts***. So where did the name ***draughts*** come from? Well, during the time of Chaucer, the word ***draught*** could refer to the movement of a game piece on a game board, especially a chess piece in the game of chess. If you moved a pawn or a rook, that move was called a ***draught***. It came from the sense of the word ***draught*** as something pulled or moved. It's the same sense that we have in the term 'draught animal' meaning an animal that pulls a plow or wagon. And in chess, a ***draught*** was the movement of a game piece on the board.

Well, the passage I just read from Chaucer's 'Book of the Duchess' contains the first known use of the word ***draught*** in that sense, meaning the movement of a game piece on a game board. Chaucer wrote that Fortune:

With hir false draughtes divers
She stal on me, and took my fers.

Or in Modern English:

With her many false drafts or moves
she stole upon me, and took my fers or queen

Over time, the word *draught* was extended to this other game that we know today as *draughts* or *checkers*. It was played on the same game board as chess, and it was another game picked up by Crusaders in the Near East. It was called *alquerque* there, but English developed its own names for the game. Again, the name *checkers* is derived from the word for the game board itself, and *draughts* is derived from the word for the movement of the game pieces across the board.

The passage I read also contains another interesting turn of phrase. Chaucer wrote:

I wish to God that once or twice
I'd studied and learnt the jeopardies

Or in Middle English:

But God wolde I had ones or twyes
Y-koud and knowe the jeupardyes

So what did Chaucer mean when he said that the knight wished that he had learned the *jeopardies*? Well, j*eopardy* was a brand-new word in the English language. It had been borrowed from French in the early 1300s, and Chaucer was actually one of the first English writers to regularly use the word in his writings. In its original usage, it was commonly used in reference to chess or other board games. It meant a key decision or move in the game that would determine victory or defeat. It was essentially the turning point in the game – when it could go either way – and when the outcome was essentially determined. It is actually a compound word. The first part is the French word *jeu* which meant game. You might remember from earlier in the episode that handball was called 'jeu de paume' in French – literally the 'game of the palm.' So the first part of *jeopardy* also used that French word for game. The second part of *jeopardy* is *parti* – literally a part or share or division. So *jeopardy* is literally 'a divided game,' but it meant an 'evenly divided game where there was an equal chance of winning or losing.' So a *jeopardy* was a game that could go either way. And when Chaucer's knight said that he wished that he had learned the jeopardies, he meant that he wished he had studied those strategic points in the game of chess to make sure that he made the right decisions and moves. But unfortunately, he made the wrong move, and Fortune captured his queen which sealed his fate. This also helps to explain how the word *jeopardy* evolved within later English. It later came to refer to any risky or perilous situation where there was a danger of loss. And even today, many of you may still associate the word *jeopardy* with games, especially if you're a fan of the TV game show called *Jeopardy!* which has aired on American televison for several decades.

Chaucer wasn't the first English writer to use the word *jeopardy*, but he was one of the first. Most of the earliest uses of the word listed in the Oxford English Dictionary are attributed to him.

Now the rest of the poem follows a very traditional courtly style and uses the standard themes of romance and longing. The knight describes how he first met the woman who stole his heart. In very poetic terms, he describes her loveliness and beauty. He recalls her dancing, and singing, and laughing and playing. He then describes her physical beauty. Again, all of this is in keeping with the courtly romance poetry of the period.

After the knight's description of the lady, he finally mentions her name. And in case there was any doubt, the name makes it clear who the lady in the poem represented. The knight says that the lady's name was *White*. So Chaucer names the lady *White* – not *Blanche*. But the courtly audience would have been familiar with French, and they would have known that the name *Blanche* is derived from the word *blanc* – the French word for 'white.' So *White* is basically an English translation of the name *Blanche*.

The poem concludes with the knight revealing that his lover had not merely left him. She had in fact died and can never return to him. The poet says that he expressed his condolences and acknowledged the sorrowful news.

And with that, the poet says that horns blew to mark the end of the hunt. The king who was taking part in the hunt rode home. Chaucer writes that the king:

Begun swiftly homeward to ride
Unto a place quite near beside,
Not far from us, would there alight:
A long castle with walls white,
By Saint John, on a rich hill,
So I dreamed, and this befell.

Or in the original Middle English:

Gan quikly hoomward for to ryde
Unto a place ther besyde,
Which was from us but a lyte,
A long castel with walles whyte,
Be seynt Johan! on a riche hil,
As me mette; but thus it fil.

Now to a modern audience, nothing may stand out in that passage. The king went home to a 'long castle' on a 'rich hill.'   But those descriptions are actually an intentional play on words. Chaucer wanted to make it clear to his audience that the knight in the poem represented John of Gaunt who was the Duke of Lancaster and the Earl of Richmond. 'Long castle' was a play on the name Lancaster. The *caster* part of Lancaster is actually derived from the Latin word *castrum*

which meant castle. And most people in England would have understood that *caster* meant castle. The first part *lan* is actually derived from the name of a river, but it sounded similar to the word *long*, so a lot of people thought of the name *Lancaster* as 'long castle.' And Chaucer intentionally makes that connection for his audience here at the end of the poem. He then says, 'Be seynt Johan! on a riche hil' – 'By Saint John, on a rich hill.' Well, Saint John is another allusion to John of Gaunt. Here Chaucer actually uses his first name. And that concluding reference to a 'rich hill' is a play on the John's earldom of Richmond. Of course, *Richmond* is literally a 'rich mound' or 'rich hill.' So again, anyone hearing this poem in the late 1300s would have understood that all of those references were to the man whose wife was being mourned and honored in the poem.

With the king's return to his long castle on a rich hill, a clock bell strikes twelve, and the poet awakes from his dream bringing the poem to an end.

Again, this is oldest surviving original poem composed by Geoffrey Chaucer, at least the oldest which is clearly attributable to him. He was still a young man at the time, and the Book of the Duchess is notable because it shows the greatest poet of Middle English in his formative years. The poem is not as revered as his later works, but it's interesting because it shows Chaucer working within the framework of courtly poetry of the time. As I noted earlier, it follows the traditional style of that poetry, except that Chaucer substituted English for French, and that is a notable development in itself.

The poem is also interesting because it confirms Chaucer's close connection to John of Gaunt who was about to emerge as a leading figure in England with the death of the king and the Black Prince.

And for purposes of this episode, the poem is interesting because it shows Chaucer's interest in games and the language of gaming. He used the loss of the queen in a game of chess as a metaphor for the loss of the Duchess. He also incorporated several terms related to chess and other board games. The poem contains the first known use of some of those terms, and in his other works, he introduced several words and phrases related to dice. As I noted earlier in the episode, he is the first English writer to use gaming and sports terms like *racket*, *raffle*, and the phrase 'at sixes and sevens' which also apparently relates to dice. So in that regard, Chaucer was very much a man of his time, reflecting the interests and pastimes of his audience. The king may have preferred for his subjects to practice archery, but Chaucer shows us that the people actually enjoyed playing other games, and that's probably why the king's restrictions never had much of an impact on the games that people played in their spare time.

Next time, we'll move the story forward another decade into the 1370s. We'll continue to look at developments in the language and literature of England. But we'll also look at what some of that literature was being written on. There was a brand new writing material in England, and that material was paper. So next time, we'll see how the introduction of paper shaped the evolution of the English language.

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